

Agnotology & Gender

A Kit Kat Essay

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The more I know, the less I understand.
— Don Henley, "The Heart Of The Matter"

With thanks to Sean Allen, for leading our Club, my beloved nominee, my greatest contribution to Kit Kat,

with thanks to Arthur Nemitoff, whose move to Kansas City opened the seat that I occupy,

with thanks to Jon York for nominating me,

I dedicate this essay to Duncan Isaac, Helen Isaac, and Alisa Isaac for teaching me about — and encouraging me on — my subject tonight and many other subjects. That said, any errors or omissions are mine alone.



There are two kinds of essayists here at Kit Kat.

There are the essayists who are expert: they know what they are talking about. There is a confidence and certainty to their presentation. The content is complete. The questions are answered.

These essayists are the pride of Kit Kat.

I'm the other kind of Kit Kat essayist. This is my third essay and it is the third time that I really do not know what I'm talking about.

It's my own fault. I picked a topic that baffles me. That was true of my first two essays: on the ethics of speech and the zen of Kit Kat. To this day, I am still not ready to present those essays.

My process for selecting a topic always included two and a half years of shuffling through wonderments. For tonight, I almost prepared an essay on the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. (I went to New York City for a week of training, in preparation for that essay idea.) I almost wrote this essay on circumcision. (I went so far as to ask Christopher Katt what he might prepare for dinner that night. His answer? Beef tips.)

About ten months ago, Alisa Isaac said: "Artie, you aren't wondering about Myers-Briggs or circumcision. You have been long wondering about — and studying — the subject of gender."

She's right. I care about tonight's question. But I haven't answered it yet.

I really love this kind of essay. Last year, when Scott Powell set out to answer the question of the authorship of the works attributed to William Shakespeare, there was that question. And he answered it with scholarship and he came to a conclusion, but along the way he and we were swamped by a larger, more difficult question: how does a grateful son thank his beloved, late mother? That question was both answered completely and left completely unanswered. Unanswerable, perhaps.

I feel like I'm not prepared. **I fear I will not do my subject justice.**

So let's start with *Agnotology & Gender*. First, agnotology.



I appear before you in a state of increasing ignorance.

And in this essay, I shall prove it.

And during our time together, I hope to take you with me.

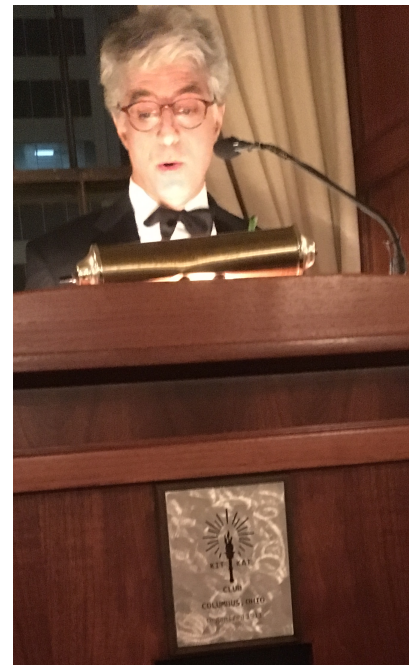
Not on a journey into my ignorance, but on our communal and your individual quest for increasing ignorance.

Let me first say that my increasing ignorance is not caused by disease or the general degradation of the brain that we fear as we age. As far as I know.

My ignorance is the result of intellectual curiosity, personal daring, and living in a house with people who are smarter than I am. I am not trying to stem my ignorance.

To the contrary, I am working my ignorance like a muscle, strengthening my ability to deepen my ignorance.

I come to you in increasing ignorance.



"Agnotology." If this word is new to you, as it was to me earlier this year when I heard it from John Huston at our book club, let me introduce you to "Agnotology."

Agnotology is a word that was coined in a 1995 book, *The Cancer Wars: How Politics Shapes What We Know and Don't Know About Cancer*, by Robert N. Proctor, a Stanford University professor specializing in the history of science and technology. Its name derives from the Neoclassical Greek word ἄγνωσις, agnōsis, "not knowing." More generally, the term also highlights the increasingly common condition where more knowledge of a subject leaves one more uncertain than before.¹

*Agnotology is the study of **culturally induced ignorance or doubt**, particularly the publication of inaccurate or misleading scientific data.*

A prime example of the deliberate production of ignorance cited by Proctor is the tobacco industry's advertising campaign to manufacture doubt about cancer and other health effects of tobacco use. Under the banner of science, the industry produced research about everything except tobacco hazards to exploit public uncertainty.

Agnotology also focuses on how and why diverse forms of knowledge do not "come to be," or are ignored or delayed. For example, knowledge about plate tectonics was censored and delayed for at least a decade because some evidence was classified military information related to undersea warfare.

For my study of agnotology, I asked the Bexley Public Library to buy a copy of *Agnotology: The Making And Unmaking of Ignorance*. It's a collection of essays, written by smart people on the theory and application of ignorance.

¹ I am liberally and blatantly quoting Wikipedia without (until now) attribution, in an act that might have long ago (when I was in college) been called plagiarism, but now is called sampling and is encouraged for the free exchange and expansion of ideas. Is protection of intellectual rights a quaint academic aspect of agnotology? For my definition, I turned to Wikipedia, quoting as identified in *italics*.

When I said "Wikipedia," many of you blanch, chortle, or queeze.

"Wait," you are now thinking, "is 'queeze' a word? I know 'queasy.' Is 'queeze' the intransitive verb form of 'queazy?'" I admit that I typed the word in whimsical delight with how it sounded in the series: *blanche, chortle or queeze*. Then, I wondered the same thing you did, so I looked it up. And I found that it is listed at UrbanDictionary.com and means exactly what I had intended.

That is, I mention Wikipedia — and now the Urban Dictionary — and you queeze, suffering indigestion at the mention of these sources.

But, my friends of a certain belief and experience, let me welcome you to our first descent tonight into greater ignorance. Your dislike of Wikipedia is not based on the value of Wikipedia. It is based on your dislike of Wikipedia. You fear that Wikipedia might someday overtake *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Egad. I queeze.

It might have happened recently for you, as it did for me. I clicked to Wikipedia and I found an explanation and I leapt over disbelief (that disbelief being "the Internet is filled with unsubstantiated garbage"). I leapt over disbelief because what I found there was pretty darned good. It seemed quite substantiated. And suddenly I feel ignorant because of my prejudice. The old implied rules (about the Internet being nothing more than porn and social folderol) broke down — and I have not caught up.

Anyway, this isn't about Wikipedia. This is about ignorance and how to get you closer to it.

Within that anthology, I read Nancy Tuana's essay — entitled "Coming To Understand, Orgasm and the Epistemology of Ignorance" — in which Tuana teaches that any epistemology — any search for the boundary between opinion and justified belief — must "include a story of ignorance, not just knowledge." After all, we are as stuck in our ignorance as we are in the quest for *Lux et Veritas*, illumination and truth.

So let us turn to an example of ignorance. This is the example of my essay, entitled *Agnotology & Gender*. It's time to get to the gender part.



But first, I'd like to point out that — a few paragraphs ago — I said the word "orgasm." That's a word that creates ignorance in me. I don't understand much about orgasm. I know only this: I know when it's happening to me. Everything else about it raises more questions than answers.

(Perhaps this would be a good topic for Dr. Terry Davis, for his third Annual Meeting essay.)

I'm pausing, however, on the word, for only one reason. It is so gendered. How I see the word is so influenced by gender. When I said the word — even now — did you think it referred to male orgasm or female orgasm? You might have thought female. I figured it was male. Even though the author's name is Nancy Tuana. And, I presume, Nancy is a woman.

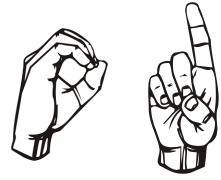
And suddenly, I'm thinking of how, for much of its history, medical research has mainly studied the physiology of northern European men. And how that becomes the politics of ignorance. We remain relatively ignorant about women's health, and the health of anyone who is not "white;" we remain less able to treat them — and that is the very heart of agnotology.

OK. Now gender.



I am wrestling with this question: **"Is gender a fiction?"** **By fiction, I don't mean "doesn't exist."** **By fiction, I mean: a social construction**, a story that has been authored to express some sort of truth, to illuminate our wonderment, and enlighten us in our ignorance, to free us from our puzzlement.

First, what is gender? Gender is traditionally merged with a variety of other aspects of being human. For example, here are two of those other aspects²:



1. Sex

Different from gender, sex is the classification of people as male or female.

At birth, infants are assigned a sex, usually based on the appearance of their external anatomy. (This is what is written on the birth certificate. We are born into gender.

We are greeted by an expert announcing, "It's a boy." or "It's a girl.") However, a person's sex is actually a combination of bodily characteristics including: chromosomes, hormones, internal and external reproductive organs, and secondary sex characteristics. I presume that this is where gendering started: that we believed that people with one form of genitalia are fundamentally different — beyond the genitalia, beyond our roles in procreation — from people with different genitalia. As we are hearing from larger numbers of people who are increasingly free to speak up, genitalia determines whether you are male or female sex, but it doesn't determine your gender.

2. Sexual Orientation

Also different from gender, sexual orientation describes an individual's physical, romantic and/or emotional attraction to another person. Gender identity and sexual orientation are not the same. Oscar Wilde was accused of being a sodomite, an effeminate, but — we now know — who you love doesn't define your gender.

So, if that's what gender is not, what is gender? Here are two aspects:

1. Gender Expression

These are the visible external manifestations of gender, expressed through one's name, pronouns, clothing, haircut, behavior, voice, or body characteristics. Society identifies these cues as masculine and feminine, although what is considered masculine and feminine changes over time and varies by culture.

Let's think about gender expression. When I ask you to picture a man, what do you imagine? A man strides down the street every bit the man, from his Stetson to his polished oxfords, his trim facial hair, his super macho bow tie. When I ask you to picture a woman, what do you imagine? High heels and purse, hairdo and fragrance, a dress with a neckline and hemline, revealing or concealing. These are manifestations of gender expression. They are choices, heavily influenced by society and culture. So are all these aspects of gender.

² Definitions are adapted from those on the website of GLAAD (formerly the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) at glaad.org/reference/transgender.

It's funny. I used to be very good at sitting in an airport and people watching. I was good at determining gender. Someone would walk past and my gender radar would indicate: guy or gal. Years ago, I would be confident about 999 of every 1,000 passersby. Maybe 1 in 10,000 would leave me stumped. Could be a turtleneck sweater. A couple years ago, I noticed that my radar was failing more often. About 1 in 1,000 folks was not expressing — at least not to me — a preference for "guy" or "gal." It seems like everyone was one haircut and one outfit away from scrambling my gender radar. I've given up people watching.³

A person in a skirt is not necessarily a woman. It could be a Scotsman.



We've covered sex and sexual orientation, which are often mistakenly merged with gender. And we've covered one aspect of gender: gender expression. Here is a second aspect of gender:

2. **Gender Identity**

This is one's internal, deeply held sense of one's gender. Most people have a gender identity of man or woman (or boy or girl). For some people, their gender identity does not fit neatly into one of those two choices or does not match the sex they were assigned at birth. Gender identity is invisible to others.

Gender identity is how I see myself. What is the third-person pronoun that I think best describes me: he, she, they, x, z?

In my recent study of gender, which began about five years ago, I find that the moment that tests many people is another person's declaration of a preference among third-person pronouns. Whenever anyone requests a preference for "they" as the third-person singular — as in "I prefer to be referred to as 'they,' rather than 'he' or 'she' — we encounter the question — "Is gender a fiction?"

If I can ask you to refer to me as 'they,' then gender is a fiction. It can be edited by us as authors of our own stories.

When a loved one first asked me to refer to them as "them," it seemed very complex, disruptive and hard to understand (and even made me angry). At first, I was more committed to protecting traditional grammar than accepting a simple verbal request. A couple years later, I still slip up and sometimes use a gendered pronoun with them. I believe that this is a difficult habit for me to break because the gendering of language — and people — is so strongly established. I've been reading, writing and living in a gendered narrative all my life.

³ It feels like a violation of others' right to privacy.

But I am getting the hang of it. Most of my teachers regarding gender are Millennials. I discussed this essay with several, diverse Millennials and they regard this essay with two thoughts: "no kidding" and "surprising to hear this from a parent." **They will describe us, when they write our history, as the people who defended grammar over self-determination, and the people who argued about who may use which bathroom** (amplifying to an imagined degree, some sort of danger, resisting building gender-neutral bathrooms, like I saw this summer at the new restaurant at the Modern Museum of Art in New York).

Rick Richards brought us his giant essay — the only type he brings — *When Did I Choose?* on the topic of whether sexual orientation (expression, attraction, identity) is self-determined or inborn. I've come to believe that this debate — when it is in the public realm — is a good example of agnotology, where ignorance influences politics. That's because, as far as I'm concerned, it doesn't matter to me whether your sexual orientation — or your gender preference — was God given, your whim of the moment, or delivered in a box from Amazon. The issue isn't — for me — what led to your gender or sexual orientation. I think the issue is: are you allowed to be who you say you are? That's what we're arguing about.

My opinion? **I think gender is like Granville. You want to live in Granville? Have at it. And, if you must know someone's gender (or whether that person lives in Granville), perhaps the best way to find out is to ask.**



There is a broader look at identity (including and beyond sex and gender) which is called intersectionality. This is where we realize that the ingredients of one's identity are many — all the aspects of demography — and they are all playing at the same time. I'm not just my gender. I'm a person who identifies as male, Jewish, has wealth, is educated, thinks of himself as white, is 56 and gray-haired, whose disabilities include farsightedness and cross vision. All of those aspects intersect, where I stand, playing into my understanding of my identity.

A CEO told me that to hear her voice as gendered is to risk mishearing her. "My voice is based on many more essential insights and experiences than my being a woman." Plus, she said: "Some of the men around this table are more likely to bring you a more feminine point of view."



If all this agnotology and gender hasn't confounded us enough, let's talk about the history of the study of sex differences. (Recall that sex is different from gender. Sex is physical and bodily. Gender is expression and identity.)

Regarding sex, you might ask, what about the clarity of genetics and chromosomes? Well, long ago, when we were first decoding the double helix, there was great certainty about the Y and X chromosomes. For most of the 20th century, we thought — we believed — that the brain, in development, started female, then testosterone triggered the brain to develop along male lines.

It was a pleasingly simple story: There are 46 chromosomes in a human; 23 pairs. Everyone has a set of chromosomes from each parent, including a pair of sex chromosomes. The mother's egg always contains an X chromosome while the father's sperm always contains either a Y or an X chromosome. That's the simple story about sex that supported our enduring desire to think of gender as binary.

But a more complicated story has emerged. Now, we understand that we were looking at sex development too simply. During the last 25 years, more than 25 genes have been found to lead to differences in sex development. And more recently, DNA sequencing has identified variations of expression of these genes that lead to subtle differences in sex development. Additionally, relative sensitivity to hormones, such as testosterone, also plays a role in sex development.

Studies in mice show that — even after birth — the gonad may teeter between male and female throughout life.⁴

Study of individual cells within a specific person further complicates matters. Some cells of an XY individual might not have a Y chromosome.

It turns out that sex difference is genetically more like eye color than it is a bi-modal distinction. Gender is not mono-genetic. It is poly-genetic.

So you can have androgen insensitivity, such as people who have Y chromosomes and internal testes, but external organs develop as female at puberty.

When you take into account all the relative degrees, some researchers believe that as many as 1-in-100 people has some form of difference or disorder of sex development.⁵

Daphna Joel led a team at Tel Aviv University that took MRIs and other brain imaging, and placed them on a continuum based on the size of the hippocampus. The average male hippocampus is greater in volume than the average female hippocampus. Human brains are mosaics, they concluded, with some features more common to female, and less common to males, and *vice versa*. But not enough to say that "This brain is male. This brain is female."⁶

⁴ Uhlenhaut, N.H. *et al. Cell* 139, 1130-1142 (2009).
Matson, C.K. *et al. Nature* 476, 101-104 (2011).

⁵ Arboleda, V.A., Sandberg, D.E. & Vilain, E. *Nature Rev. Endocrinol.* 10, 603-615 (2014). Two examples: A 70-year-old man, who fathered four children, presented for a hernia operation and was found to have a uterus. He counts as one of the 1-in-100. A pregnant woman, getting amniocentesis during her *third* pregnancy, was found to be a Chimaera. She was a composite of male and female. She was one of the 1-in-100. 1-in-100. How many people would be 1% of Columbus?

⁶ Joel, Daphna, *et al.* "Sex Beyond The Genitalia: The Human Brain Mosaic," *Proceedings of the Natl Acad of Sci of the USA* 112(50), 15468-15473 (2015).

Saying people are male or female is like saying that people are either blond or brunette. And anyone in between is a disorder. In our quest to keep everything tidy and binary, we popularly wish to define differences as disorders. We prefer the rush to identifying disorders. A child who can't sit in a chair for some arbitrary time period must lead to a diagnosis of ADHD.

It's easy to imagine that sex is neither dichotomy nor spectrum, but milieu; not binary, but a stew. Each aspect of gender — attraction, expression, orientation — as well as sex development through adulthood — can be unpredictably and separately in motion, over time, within any person.

I want to add: I'm not a research scientist. I'm not qualified to claim that laboratory science is conclusive on the question: is gender a fiction? The science, for me, has to be set aside.

But considering some of the recent findings in sex development that I just described, we can see how **our traditional, concrete, binary ideas about gender are on a shaky foundation. It's hard to prove, in a laboratory, the existence of gender.**



Magnus Hirschfield, a German psychiatrist wrote in 1910 about gender: "In each person, there is a different mixture of manly and womanly substances, and as we cannot find two leaves alike on a tree, then it is highly unlikely that we will find two humans whose manly and womanly characteristics equally match in kind and number."⁷

Hirschfield collected questionnaires from 10,000 people leading to his conclusion that all of us were bisexual, bigendered, infinitely varied, only differing in degree. He thought that gender categories did not describe essence any more than did race, ethnicity, religion, or nationality. "Hirschfield was more interested in freeing people to express their own idiosyncratic [gender] than in nailing down which patient belonged to which of two [genders]." Hirschfield calculated 43,046,721 [gender] types, and then concluded that was not enough. He ends up implying that there are as many genders as there are people. We are more alike than we are different.⁸

But we have loved the fiction. Some of us remain devoted to it. The Bible tells us it is holy. And for more than a thousand years, gendering served important purposes. We continue to enact a time when women didn't have legal standing, voting rights, citizenship, when they were in danger if not protected by a man. And we do keep that narrative alive in cultural traditions, such as a father walking his daughter down the aisle and giving her hand in marriage to another man.⁹

⁷ Faludi, Susan, *In The Darkroom*, 154, Metropolitan Books, Henry Holt & Co, NY (2016).

⁸ Faludi, *ibid*, 156.

⁹ I don't plan to be walking Helen down the aisle, giving them away.

And we have reinforced that narrative in the retail world, which offers us Men's, Women's, Boys' and Girls' departments — with highly gendered clothing.

We are like two piles of sand that keep merging together; and we keep dusting up the two piles, trying to keep them separate. We are very invested in believing that humans are gendered. So much so that we are willing to force gender on people in acts and language that can amount to violence.



How is it changing my life to recognize that gender is a social construct?

- I am constantly wondering whether the attempt to divide the world into two genders is now causing more harm than good. I am wondering if **we might be better off to regard gender as no longer relevant.** I am seeing situations where gender promotes exclusion rather than inclusion.
- I am deeply studying my sense of privilege. There is much being said about privilege these days. I have been invited to "check my privilege." And I am doing so.
- I am working to eliminate — or at least identify, declare and mitigate — behaviors that express my privilege. None of my privileged traditions — none of them — are more important than justice.

Here's an example.

I now de-escalate. Women do this all the time.

I first encountered the idea of de-escalation during a conversation in New York with Helen Isaac, our child, Duncan's sibling. We were talking about gender, and whether it is a fiction. This was the first moment I began to understand how agnotology might explain my outdated definition of gender: a bi-modal, uncompromising definition, bestowed upon me by tradition and culture.

Helen said: "Your view of every person you encounter is, at first, gendered."

"No, it isn't," I said, fancying myself a thoroughly contemporary human who had evolved beyond implicit biases.

"Sure, it is," said Helen. "When you walk down the street, **you assess all men for violence and all women for sex.**"

"That's preposterous," I said.

"Let's take a walk," said Helen.

Within 40 yards on 23rd Street, I realized that I had indeed assessed every man for violence and every woman for mating, for sex.

So, back to de-escalation. De-escalation is what every woman does, because we live in a culture where women are taught to fear men, a culture where women are shamed for being raped (shamed by our law enforcement processes, shamed by our legal system, shamed on social media, shamed by their own families). A culture where CEOs speak dismissively of women. A culture where 40 million Americans will vote for a Presidential candidate who has lived a life of sexual assault as sport.

Women are right to be afraid. We were raised in a culture of rape, where women are taught how not to get raped — don't drink freely, don't dress freely, don't associate freely, don't travel freely — but men are only recently being taught how not to rape. That's rape culture.

So what is de-escalation? You see it every time you gaze at a woman. If, perchance she glances back at you, she immediately looks away, or down. She de-escalates the situation. If the man is starting with a glance, and it turns into a raised eyebrow, and he creates the idea that something is escalating — she de-escalates. Usually, it happens before the first glance: you pull up at a red traffic light and look at the woman in the adjacent car. She doesn't look at you. This isn't because you aren't dashing. This is because the world is a hostile place if you are a woman. (Ask any woman about the precautions she takes on a continuous basis in every parking lot.)

Q: When we are visually admiring women, do you know what we look like?

A: Like men assessing women for sex.

Fancy yourself a gentleman? Work on de-escalating. The Talmud teaches us not to look in other peoples' windows. The eyes are the windows of the soul. Avert your eyes.

Consider a story from an essay on de-escalation by Gretchen Kelly called "The Thing All Women Do That You Don't Know About." The story is written by a young mother, recounting a visit to the shopping mall, where her young son becomes aware of the hungry eyes of men fixed on his mother. He asked her, "**Mommy, what does that man want from you?**"

[pause]

You might enjoy gazing at women. I did. But, while I always thought admiring women was a social norm, that it was only admiring, and it was the right and privilege to which I was born, such gazing is actually the behavior of a buffoon. Among a buffoon's many qualities: lack of self-awareness, combined with an air of self-importance.



Gender, we are learning, is less of a fact — and more of a performance. I am costumed and playing the role of a man.

As a transwoman said, "I impersonate myself."¹⁰

In 1990, Judith Butler, a philosopher who has written about gender and feminism, proposed a new way of viewing gender: not as binary, not as a continuum, but as a performance. A performance highly informed by social norms.¹¹

You might be thinking — as I long have — that, "*Consarnit*. There is a difference between men and women beyond their body parts. I just can't define it." I believe that the attempt to define it, so we can believe in a tidy difference, is what leads us to an oversimplified view of gender as fixed, bimodal, and externally defined.

From the moment of the amniocentesis, we paint the nursery pink or blue. And there are more subtle behaviors of ours that we don't even realize. The conditioning is so pervasive as to be inescapable. This becomes implicit bias, however loving the intention.

To me, gender is a social construction through which we imitate others. How we perform as men is different than it was, as social norms have changed. Gentlemen used to wear powdered wigs, and the performance was regarded as manly. Want to hang onto the tradition of being a gentleman? Which tradition? The 1950s? The 1750s? Social norms change.

But **bimodal gender has never been a fact. It has been an enacted belief**, in which we have become increasingly invested.

I used to know everything about gender. Now that I have studied, I know less and less. And I'm better educated and better off for it.



During the summer, as I was beginning the writing of this essay, I called Sean Allen to chat with him in his role as Membership Chair.

We discussed our Club's highly gendered, long treasured membership rule. Our bylaws state "Membership shall be open to men only."

I asked him: what is the membership committee's test for maleness: genitalia, expression, attraction, identity?

¹⁰ Faludi, *op. cit.*

¹¹ Butler, Judith, *Gender Trouble* 34, Rutledge Classics, NY, London (1990, 2007)

Would a current member who transitions to female be allowed to stay? He said, "Yes, of course. Once a Kat, always a Kat. Sure." So I asked, would the transition to female expression — even if the male body is unchanged — be permitted? If I started expressing myself as female? How about this: Would a female candidate be allowed in if she said she had started transitioning and would be male by the first meeting?

We were on the phone, but I could clearly hear Sean's smoking jacket turn a deeper shade of violet.

We, my friends, are standing at the gates of agnotology. We aren't the definition of agnotology, because we aren't, as a Club, engaged in the disciplined study of gender. If we were, I think we would realize that **we don't have a working methodology for what gender is**, and then we would face our own agnotology. Suddenly, it might make sense why — even from childhood — our separation of people due to gender assessment has always seemed — to me, and perhaps to some of you — breathless, insistent, patriarchal.

From the sign on the tree house, "No girlz allowed,"

to the all too obvious discrimination of women in the workplace and beyond,

to the now defunct exclusion of women in clubhouses like the Columbus Club,

to the enduring exclusion of people due their assessed gender here at Kit

Kat

— to me, even in my childhood, all of the concern about gender being bimodal has always seemed a little squirrely, the unimportant made important. Now, through five years of research and contemplation, and during this year's composition of this essay, I came to realize that *bimodal gender* is not a fact; it is a social construct that is self-limiting, socially limiting, hurtful, and worse.



When my book club friend John Huston described agnotology, he offered one aspect. "We all know that ignorance is bliss. This is because, the more we study a subject, the more we realize we don't know. Therefore, the goal of study is to know almost nothing at all about the topic studied."

I'm getting closer. I'm nearly at the point where I am unable to answer any of your questions.

Thank you.¹²

¹² With the conclusion of this essay, I intend to resign my membership in the Kit Kat Club.

When I set out to write this essay, from selecting the topic through the research and drafting, I had no intention of resigning my membership. I had always thought that my departure from Kit Kat was in a pine box.

But, upon completing the final working draft on October 8th, I realized something had changed. Then, reading the essay aloud for first time (to time it), I heard anger in my voice. What was I angry about? We feel anger — a primal emotion — when we are blocked from getting something we want. I want an egalitarian society and, above all, justice.

As I look back, when Jon York invited me to join Kit Kat, I declined for a couple years due to the exclusion of women. Over time, Jon, my lifelong friend and mentor, kindly offered to nominate me again. Finally, he said, "Are you ever intentionally in the society of only men? Do you play poker? (No.) Do you play basketball? (No.) How about at work? (Clients and staff are mostly women.) How about at home? (Run by women.) Well, then, *would it kill you to spend one evening each month in the company of men?*" I remain grateful for Jon's persistent and affectionate invitation.

You know me. You have seen me in Kit Kat. We have enjoyed 80 dinners during twelve years. You know I have made every effort to be a good member. I have served as essayist three times — and as President, Secretary (establishing and maintaining the website), and a member of the Executive and Membership Committees. More than all that, I came to love you. And I love you today. But I abhor the Club's explicit, intentional exclusion for gender.

As I prepared this essay, my answer — to Jon's question, "*Would it kill you to spend one evening each month in the company of men?*" — changed.

It's killing me.

This is a personal mismatch of my values and the Club's bylaws. My journey is headed toward inclusion and away from exclusion. I must go.

On October 10th, I met with Sean to inform him that I would resign my membership after the essay. Our conversation was generous, intellectual, emotional — the only conversations Sean has. We wondered whether the Club is ready to drop its exclusion for gender. I do not know.

A piece of writing advice which Sean offered and I took: "Don't make the essay a resignation letter. Edit the essay only up to the point where you realized you were leaving. That is the power of this essay, that you read it aloud and *only then* determined what you must do. That is the essay I want to hear: the essay that changed you." This was a brilliant insight and powerful creative direction.

Questions¹³:

Q. Are you blissful?

A. No.

Q. I was noting the difference between data, information, knowledge, and wisdom on a scale and you brought us wisdom. I appreciate what you said. Where do we go from here, because you raise incredibly important issues and facts and I think we understand that we are not ready necessarily as a society — or even as a club — to act upon them. So what do we do?

A. I don't know what to do. And regarding the idea of data, information, knowledge, and wisdom, I think of truth and facts, and facts have little sway with me. I am more interested in truth, and so I find things I think are true. If there are facts that support it, it is because Alisa did the research and put that in there. As for where to we go, I don't think we have to worry about that. I think the Millennials, who are now already the largest generation in the workplace, and by 2020 will be more than 50% of the workforce, they don't have any problem with this. I don't think we have to worry about driving the car in a certain direction. The car has left. We don't have to do anything.

Q. [A question about the merit of keeping the sexes separate] ...For example, high school sports: I'm absolutely willing to have girls play high school football, but not willing to have boys play field hockey. I think it would be unfair to the girls. What do you think of this?

A. My first thought is to recommend a book, *Between the World and Me*, by Ta-Nehisi Coates. While it doesn't deal directly with gender, although there are gender aspects within it, it deals with race; it provides a platform, a context and an understanding for race as a social construct, as is gender. I am willing to give up field hockey for justice. So, if you are asking me how I feel about it, I don't care about field hockey. He's not satisfied.

Q. I'm not satisfied with that.

A. What I mean is that that, to me, is an issue I'm willing to dispense with, so we don't live in a falsely bi-modal, gendered reality. Field hockey is going to lose this battle. Maybe we have field hockey leagues for people who only play up to a certain level. We do this in tennis. You are rated in tennis. Let us rate ourselves in field hockey. But separating people by gender seems faulty to me. Trust me on this, because I once played CSG in field hockey — a long time ago — and I lost. I don't think that the gender is what you're talking about. What you're talking about: is it fair for people to play with people who are that much bigger? In boxing, we have figured this out: we have weight classes. I think we can solve this without dividing people up by who has what body parts and what might that mean. You are not satisfied, but I appreciate your generosity.

¹³ This and some following questions are excerpted and the names of all questioners are omitted, at my discretion, because I do not want to expose the degree to which others might be challenged by the topic.

Q. Very interesting and engaging essay. I do think gender is socially constructed. But I thought in places I was listening to two different essays: I heard an essay for most of it about how gender is really complicated, with enormous variation in the middle and on both sides. And then we got to a part in the essay where: "every woman is like *this*," "every woman does *that*," "look over at the next car," "every woman you know," "ask any woman." And all of the sudden we are back in the world where you are making huge generalizations on sex. So going back to field hockey, we are in the world where women and men might be on a spectrum. Some women are going to have more testosterone and some women are faster. So I'm wondering where you really are on this, because sometimes you seem prepared to say "women always de-escalate, woman always do this" and yet I feel like the whole moral of the story was not the same.

A. Right. And that is why I created the entire doughnut of agnotology in which to place my lack of knowledge of gender. I am in the fiction. I am raised in the fiction of it. My life — and how I view it — is absolutely gendered. I'm not cured. I'm not self-righteous. I'm not advanced. I am just at the gate. So, yes, you did hear two essays. One which said "gender doesn't exist, or that it exists only as a matter of choice perhaps, or not choice (didn't matter to me, but it is unrelated to sex development)" and then you heard me unable to let go of the construct. I'm part of it.

Q. I don't want you to lose these other folks, now that you have taken us through *Lux et Veritas* and got us ignorant in all these things, but can you see anything we will lose when we are enlightened by our ignorance? For example, I told my boys, and I bet you told yours, too, that part of your job is to protect women. You can argue culturally that is not a bad thing for society. Is there something that we will lose in the process of this?

A. [To Duncan Isaac, attending as a guest:] I don't believe I ever taught you to protect women. I think I taught you not to make trouble. Right?

Q. Well, maybe I was talking about the cowboys of the West. But there was this idea that that women needed to be defended before the rest of us.

A. So what will we lose? I'm not for creating a wild wilderness on day one. Right? I guess I'm just not afraid of what we lose when we pursue justice.

Q. I think you started out by talking about ignorance. And you gave me the gift of having joy in my ignorance. And I thank you for that.

A. Thank you. Is this the first time? What's that feel like?

Q. I really enjoyed that tonight. And I go back to 25 years in Kit Kat essays and that was a great essay in the Kit Kat sense. As a Kit Katter, I could go either way —

A. There you go. That's the perfect example. Jim can go either way.

Q. [A statement about the appreciation of gender-based distinctions in fashion, and]...I'm thinking, "Has he opened the door to me to bring a friend whose name isn't normally thought of as male to the club, because it isn't appropriate to do so?" So I'm wondering where do we go?

A. Don't know.

Q. [A story about the costs and inefficiency of adding bathrooms for transgender people and:] ...So my question is: are we going to create a third category? Because this didn't tell us males or females to go to the same; it was creating an other.

A. Thank you. Let me describe the bathroom at the Museum of Modern Art's *The Modern*. It's a fine restaurant. A series of closed-door stalls, locking doors, floor-to-ceiling doors — New Albany Country Club has a similar sort of thing — and a common room for washing hands. You can actually get away with one bathroom, saving you from all the aggravation of a lack in efficiency. But, this isn't about *that*. We *think* it is about that. But we didn't have any trouble building *two* bathrooms. I think we can get back to one. And not identifying people as transgender; I think that is going the wrong direction. Who wants to be identified? It's not our part to be identifying. Just last night, I was in a meeting with a national research expert, and I'm in a group of men and one woman (whatever that means), and he's about to tell a story about someone. It's just a casual conversation, and he's about to become vulgar, and he looks at her and says, "Out of deference, I'm not going to tell this story." And I went to him this morning and I asked, "Are you open to an observation?" And he says, "Yes." I said: "One: you marked someone's gender and that is not your role." He said: "I was trying to be polite." And I said: "Well, you weren't. Because then you went on to say, 'Because *you* are here, I am *not* going to say something.' If you don't like your vulgarity, apologize for *that* to all of us. But do not identify the woman in the room and say *she* is the reason you are not talking." I think we are little upside down, socially, because I used to feel that way, too."

Q. [From a guest:] [a long statement about bathroom behavior, and then:] ...A two-part question: then, am I now allowed to declare myself a four-foot-two Chinese woman because that's the way I feel inside? The second part of the question is, if I was to cut a blow hole in the back of my head and staple a fin to my spine, would I now be declared a dolphin?¹⁴

A. These are questions that —

Q. I'm not trying to be flippant about it.

A. Sure, you are.

Q. Well, yes. I am.

A. Yeah, you are. You are being disingenuous, flippant and demonstrating while male privilege in a way that is so — bright and cheerful. You have a lot to work on. I mean, this risk — this deep risk of people declaring themselves not what they are — you don't need to worry about that. That's only on Fox.

Suggested Reading:

- Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between The World and Me*, National Book Award winner
- Susan Faludi, *In The Darkroom*
- *Transparent*, Emmy and Golden Globe winning series on Amazon Prime

¹⁴ This guest came up to me afterwards to apologize. I told him that I appreciated the question because it is a widely articulate point-of-view. I also asked him if he knew that the dolphin reference came from *South Park*; "Mr. Garrison's Fancy New Vagina," the first episode in the ninth season of the American animated television series (*Comedy Central*, 2005).

JEFFREY HUGH DONALDSON

22 October, 2016

Arise —

I HAVE WAITED SEVERAL DAYS TO WRITE, EVEN THOUGH I WANTED TO REACH OUT RIGHT AWAY. IT WAS TAKING SOME TIME FOR ME TO FULLY THINK AND FEEL ABOUT WHAT I EXPERIENCED ON TUESDAY EVENING.

LET ME BEGIN BY THANKING YOU FOR SUCH A KIND AND INTIMATE INVITATION TO KITE KAT. IT WAS A PRIVILEGE TO SIT WITH YOU AND YOUR SON, AND TO BE AMONG A SMALL GROUP OF YOUR BUDDIES AND PEERS.

I WITNESSED YOUR HONESTY, VULNERABILITY AND GRACE LIKE NEVER BEFORE. YOU FILLING OPEN A VERY DIFFICULT AND COMPLEX TOPIC, DRAWING REFINED AND IMPORTANT DISTINCTIONS BETWEEN SEX AND GENDER, GENDER EXPRESSION AND GENDER IDENTITY UNDER A PRETEXT OF AGNOLOGY. YOU GRADUALLY, DELICATELY INTRODUCED →

SUCCESSIVE LAYERS OF UNDERSTANDING, WHILE DEVELOPING A STEADILY-INCREASING LEVEL OF DISCOMFORT AMONG YOUR AUDIENCE.

AT THE END, THE MOMENT WAS LAYD BARE. ALL HATS WERE RIVETED, SOME WERE INSPIRED, MOST WERE STUPEFIED AND GRASPING FOR SOME INTELLECTUAL LIFE YET TO RAISE THEM CRUSHINGLY-HEAVY THORACES FROM THEIR CHAIR BACKS WERE ENOUGH TO DESTROY A RESPONSE OF ANY KIND.

I DON'T BELIEVE ANYONE KNEW WHAT WAS COMING, AND THAT BLINDSIDENESS ECHOED ENORMOUSLY THROUGHOUT THE MAHOGHANY, BOW-TIED DINING ROOM. AND WHEN THE HESITATIVE, UNTESTED QUESTIONS DRIBBLED OUT, YOUR RAW TRUTH NEVER WAVERED. THE CRESCENDO OCCURRED WITH YOUR FINAL ADMONITION: "YOU ARE, BEING FLIPPANT. YOU ARE SPEAKING FROM A POSITION OF WHITE MALE PRIVILEGE, AND YOU HAVE A LOT TO WORK ON."

NEVER SEEN ANYTHING LIKE IT. BRUTE INTELLECTUAL AND EMOTIONAL FORCE STRIKING SUDDENLY THROUGH A SELF-SELECTED AND SELF-SERVING GROUP OF WELL-INTENTIONED, VERY NICE PEOPLE. I THINK THE GROUP

JEFFREY HUGH DONALDSON

3

AND THE INDIVIDUALS WILL ALL BE
BETTER FOR IT — EVENTUALLY.
HOW FITZLE, AND HUMBING, THAT
YOU WERE INTRODUCED THAT NIGHT
AS "ALISA ISAAC'S HUSBAND!"

I ADMIRE YOU MORE THAN EVER,

JEFF

Please Sign In

Scott Powell

Todd Turner

Loyle D. Hise

Judge Paulson

WARREN LYER

Phil Johnson

Scott Weisler

Scott Gaston

Duke Leck

Gene Brown

Jim Antle

Brent Mulren

Paul Richards

Jill Hain

Paul H. J.

Tom Robinson

Jim Johnson

Larry Davis

Arnt P. Howe

Please Sign In

Joan Auen

ANNE ISAAC

Dumas Isaac

JOHN OHLSTEN

JEFF DONARDSON

Peter Bennett

Walter Hill

Paul Smith

Allen J. Gentes

John Easton

MARK REAL

Ric Peim

Rich Simpson

David Staley

Michael Schoedinger

Rick Herrmann

Propert Waudel

Johnny Allen

Fred ~~Shealy~~

Please Sign In

Ann Conroy

John Sabinoy

Tom Urie