

# Reading Group Guide



# Discussion Questions

1. Jacob writes about how everyone has a coming-of-gender story, regardless of their own gender identity. How has this memoir made you consider and think of your own sense of gender? Do you have coming-of-gender stories or moments of your own?
2. Gendered clothing plays a huge role in *Sissy*, both as a form of self-expression and as a tool for political change. Discuss some of the ways clothing was pivotal in Jacob's life: What opportunities did it restrict or afford them? What roles do fashion and clothing play in your own gender expression and life? What's a fashion risk that you've been afraid to take but have always wanted to try?
3. *Sissy* is simultaneously deeply personal and laugh-out-loud funny. What impact did the humor have on you when you read the book? How do you think the blend of humor and seriousness contributes to the book's political and social goals? In what ways is this most authentic to real life?
4. Faith is still a major part of Jacob's life. How are religion and faith, especially in a Southern community, explored in *Sissy*? In what ways has this shaped your understanding of the Southern queer experience?
5. As Jacob discusses, *Sissy* was born out of their need to heal their "gender-based trauma" and argues that we are all victims of this in some capacity. How do you relate to this, and what actions can we take toward preventing and healing gender-based trauma in a collective sense?
6. Do you have children? If so, do you plan to raise them with a specific set of gender expectations? Why or why not? Do you feel differently about this after reading *Sissy*?
7. Jacob argues that the gender binary is harmful not just for gender nonconforming individuals but for all people. How have you experienced gendered assumptions or expectations? How have gender stereotypes and policing impacted your life?
8. How has Jacob's story defied stereotypes or commonly held beliefs you might have had about LGBTQIA+ individuals? In what ways does their singular story open up your own understanding of the different experiences and diversity within the queer and trans community?
9. What did you most take away from reading *Sissy*?



# A Conversation with Jacob Tobia

## about *Sissy*



**SISSY IS IN MANY WAYS A DEPARTURE FROM THE TYPES OF TRANS STORYTELLING THAT WE'RE USED TO. WHAT DID YOU HAVE TO TAKE INTO CONSIDERATION WHEN WRITING? WAS THERE ANYTHING IN PARTICULAR YOU WERE MOST CONCERNED ABOUT GETTING RIGHT?**

I spent the first few years of my career working in the LGBTQ movement, and within the movement people are laser focused on “getting the messaging right.” Which generally means catering to the least common denominator, watering down your community’s story, making it so digestible that it’s basically corn syrup. It gets the job done, sure, but it’s not nourishment. Too often, in our quest to be understood by people who are not transgender, we oversimplify things, robbing ourselves of our wit and humor and nuance and general messiness.

*Sissy* is a foundational transgender story. It is a comedic memoir about how, growing up in Raleigh, North Carolina, I came to understand my identity as a sissy, a queen, a queer femme, and a gender nonconforming trans person. But it’s not an “earnest” or “precious” take on that experience; the book doesn’t arrive at any convenient conclusions or Hallmark moments. If anything, *Sissy* is a rebellion against mainstream pressure to remove the rough edges, to make my trans story “more digestible” or “easier to understand.”

Instead of cleaning up the rough edges, *Sissy* is based on the principle that the mess is the best part. It is less the story of how I went from “one gender” to “the other” (as if such lines can be drawn in the first place) and more the story of how I buzzed about between genders for years, collecting as much pollen on my haunches as I could. It’s my hope that this book will encourage everyone (not just trans/gender nonconforming people) to consider their own coming-of-gender stories. We all have one to tell.

**WHAT DID YOU LEARN ABOUT YOURSELF DURING THE WRITING PROCESS?**

Writing this book has been the single most healing thing I’ve ever done in my life—much more so than I’d anticipated. I worried the process of writing the book was going to be painful, that curating my most private thoughts and greatest failures was going to be exhausting, but the beauty of a book is that you can’t phone it in. You have to write from the heart. You have to write the book that is burning inside of you. And the book burning inside of me was, first and foremost, one that I wanted to read.

I wrote this book for myself, to make sense of what navigating the world has felt like; to try to stitch my broken heart back together. But the beautiful thing about healing is that it’s contagious. I only learned to heal from my trauma after watching other people in my life do it. As a book, *Sissy* documents the journey that I’ve undertaken to heal my gender-based trauma. My hope is that it inspires everyone it touches to do the same. I’m trying to be part of a movement of people rising up and claiming that gender has hurt us all, and that we owe it to each other to heal together and in public.

## “NOTHING’S SUGAR-COATED— GLITTER-CAKED, MAYBE, BUT CERTAINLY NOT SUGAR-COATED.”

Without giving too much away, I’ll say this: Readers can expect a level of irreverence, silliness, and raunchiness that they haven’t seen from me before. Nothing’s sugar-coated—glitter-caked, maybe, but certainly not sugar-coated. And the normal things that are often deemed “too impolite” to talk about as a trans person in the public eye are definitely in there. I talk about my dick, about boners, about feeling gassy, and so much more. There are also some truly gut-punching moments. I tried to take the gloves off with this thing and write from the heart. My strategy was Muhammad Ali inspired: floating like a butterfly, jokes on jokes, then stinging like a bee just as the prose starts to feel comfortable.

### YOU’VE BEEN WRITING PUBLICLY ABOUT YOUR LIFE FOR A WHILE. WHY IS NOW THE RIGHT TIME TO PUBLISH A BOOK?

By the time I sat down to write *Sissy*, I didn’t really have a choice. It was dancing in my heart, bouncing about in my head, desperate to get out. I’ve been writing personal essays and op-eds for a number of years now, but there is only so much you can say about yourself in a thousand-word digital essay. You have to wrap it up too quickly. You have to get to the point.

There are certain stories, certain arcs and ideas in anyone’s life, that require room to breathe. My journey with gender is one of those; coming to terms with my gender and learning to love myself has been my life’s work. That journey needed space, needed to be told in long form, needed a book-length work, and even then it was difficult to pare things down. My first draft of *Sissy* was 167,000 words, or about 700 printed pages. It was tough, but we managed to get it down to a slim 319!

### WHAT’S YOUR FAVORITE THING ABOUT BEING TRANS? WHAT IS THE BEST PART ABOUT BEING YOU?

Being trans has taught me everything I know about being a good person in this world. It has filled me to the brim with empathy for others and has pushed me to live a more contemplative, courageous, and spiritual life. In order to love myself, in order to embrace and affirm a gender that I’d always been told was wrong, I had to dig to the very foundations of my soul, to excavate all of the pain and muck, and to build myself anew. I had to be spiritually reborn. That process leaves you a changed person. Through reconnecting with your own pain, you reconnect with the pain of so many

others. Through healing yourself, you heal the world. Being trans has given me more than I ever could’ve dreamed. I’ve only learned to embrace this recently, but my gender has been the singular greatest blessing in my life.

Also, I mean, how can you not want to wear sequins all the time? How can you not adore being sparkly and cute and femme and beautiful? My presence makes the world brighter. That’s something to celebrate loudly and with fanfare.

### TRANS AND QUEER WRITERS ARE OFTEN ASKED TO SPEND THEIR WORDS SOLELY “EDUCATING” THE GENERAL PUBLIC ON GENDER/ TRANS IDENTITY. HOW HAVE YOU APPROACHED THAT IN *SISSY*? HOW HAVE YOU CHALLENGED OR TRANSCENDED THAT PRESSURE IN THE BOOK?

Honestly, I’ve been pleasantly surprised every step of the way, precisely because I haven’t felt pigeonholed or pressured into writing *Trans 101*. When I sat down with publishers in 2017 to sell the book, I went into each meeting with my armor up, prepared to do battle against being pigeonholed as “just another educational queer/trans book” (as if the industry has even published enough queer/trans memoir to get away with that as a category). I was prepared for people to look at my story and my writing as one-dimensional, but I didn’t have to fight at all.

I’ve had incredible creative freedom in crafting *Sissy*, both in terms of content and in terms of tone. I wrote the book that I wanted to write. There is nothing about this book that is pigeonholed or apologetic. I refuse to do *Trans 101* for anyone anymore (that’s what Google is for). I’ve spent far too much of my career doing that already. This book is for readers that want to go simultaneously deeper and far, far more shallow. It’s for people who want devastating truth served up with a side of dick jokes, trans primers be damned. What I love about my editor and my team at Putnam is that they’ve been on board with that from day one. I don’t know how I got so lucky, but I thank the universe every day for it!

### AS YOU SAY, *SISSY* IS CERTAINLY NOT THE FIRST MEMOIR TO TAKE ON THE IDEA OF LIVING OUTSIDE OF CONVENTIONAL GENDER. WHO ARE SOME FIGURES WHO HELPED BLAZE THIS TRAIL? DID ANY OTHER BOOKS INSPIRE OR INFLUENCE YOU?

I hate the idea that nonbinary or gender-nonconforming identities are “the new hot thing,” because first and foremost, we aren’t new. There’s nothing that I say in *Sissy* that’s, strictly speaking, “new.” I think it’s possible to hold

that your story is unique without asserting that it's new. Saying that nonbinary people are "the hot new thing," isn't right. We've always been around. As long as there has been gender, there have been gender-nonconforming people like me.

But I'll be damned if I don't claim that nonbinary and gender-nonconforming people are some of the most unique, singular individuals I've had the pleasure of meeting in my life. People on the margins of society and people whose identity sets them against the dominant cultural order have always had the most to give to the world. So while gender-nonconforming people may only have been given visibility recently, it's only because we have finally been permitted by others to speak loudly and with clarity. We've been talented and brilliant the whole time.

The fact that I got to write *Sissy* is in many ways a historical accident. The fact that I'm living in a time when people like me are given opportunities to share our stories more loudly than ever is not something that I take for granted. I live in a world where I don't, strictly speaking, have to market myself as a "A Hot, New Nonbinary Writer"; where I can market myself simply as a "Hot, New Literary Voice," and that has only been achieved on the backs of brilliant trans and gender-nonconforming activists and authors—myself and so many of my friends included—who have fought hard to be understood as people of worth.

My biggest inspirations in writing *Sissy* were other queer and trans writers. People like Leslie Feinberg, Roxane Gay, Maggie Nelson, James Baldwin, Kate Bornstein, Audre Lorde, Janet Mock, Adrienne Rich, Jenny Boylan, and my fellow North Carolinian, David Sedaris. There is nothing I'm saying that they haven't said before. The beauty of art and literature is that it's not about having "original" ideas, it's about rearticulating the same ideas in exciting and myriad ways. I'm honored to be part of a lineage of queer and trans writers who fuck shit up, take names, and don't hold back.

### **A LOT OF PEOPLE ARE CONFUSED ABOUT WHETHER OR NOT NONBINARY AND GENDER NONCONFORMING PEOPLE ARE PART OF THE TRANS COMMUNITY. HOW DO YOU EXPLAIN THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BEING NONBINARY AND BEING TRANS?**

Gender nonconforming and nonbinary people have always been part of the trans community, but an unfortunate truth about the trans movement over the last decade is that we have ostracized gender nonconforming and nonbinary trans people from our ranks. The movement has been so focused on ensuring that binary-identified trans

**“SAYING THAT NONBINARY PEOPLE ARE ‘THE HOT NEW THING,’ ISN’T RIGHT. WE’VE ALWAYS BEEN AROUND. AS LONG AS THERE HAS BEEN GENDER, THERE HAVE BEEN GENDER-NONCONFORMING PEOPLE LIKE ME.”**

men and trans women are affirmed that they have forgotten about the rest of us. It makes sense why the movement has chosen to do this: in a world where trans women and men are constantly told that their identities are fake, are a lie, aren't real, it is life-saving work to affirm the manhood of trans men and the womanhood of trans women. But in affirming the womanhood and manhood of binary-identified people in the trans community (and ensuring that trans women and men have access to the medical care and social institutions that they deserve) we can't lose sight of those of us who don't fall into either category.

I want a more expansive understanding of trans identity. In the tradition of my trans ancestors, I want to blow the lid off of the thing. The trans community is a wide, huge, all-encompassing umbrella that touches everyone on the planet. The trans community stands proudly in front of the world and proclaims that the idea of two genders is a lie, that biological essentialism, the idea that your birth sex determines your destiny, is amoral. People have never been sortable into one of two genders. Everyone is part of the trans umbrella to some degree. Every woman who has demanded to be heard when her male colleagues attempted to talk over her knows some part of the trans experience. Every man who has rebelled against masculine cultures of violence knows some facet of the trans movement. Transness is so much bigger than we can possibly name. The trans community is far-reaching and vast, covering everyone to some degree or another. So of course gender nonconforming and nonbinary people are part of the trans community, because transness is bigger than we can possibly imagine.

**“THE TRANS COMMUNITY IS A WIDE, HUGE, ALL-ENCOMPASSING UMBRELLA THAT TOUCHES EVERYONE ON THE PLANET.”**



**HOW DO YOU RESPOND TO PEOPLE WHO SAY THAT NON-BINARY IDENTITIES ARE “MADE UP” OR THAT GENDER NON-CONFORMITY IS “NEW”?**

One thing that all oppressed people share is that we have been robbed of our histories. Our stories have literally been erased, burned, destroyed, or so neglected that they turn to dust. For centuries, white men in Europe spent relentless energy purging the historical record so that it appeared that they were the only ones who ever had power. They rewrote religious texts, edited manuscripts, picked and chose which manuscripts to preserve and which to throw away. With colonization, they then went around the world destroying and looting the history of others, claiming it for themselves, dismissing ancestral and indigenous knowledges as “primitive” or “unenlightened.” In the United States, this has also been our legacy. White men in America have expended endless energy ensuring that women, indigenous people, people of color, and queer and trans people have no sense of our history. They write our history books for us, erasing us or telling our stories in the most politically convenient way for them.

**“IN MANY ANCIENT AND INDIGENOUS SOCIETIES, GENDER NONCONFORMING PEOPLE WERE UNDERSTOOD AS SACRED, AS PROPHETIC, AS MORE IN TOUCH WITH THE DIVINE.”**

The psychological effect that this has had on the trans and gender nonconforming community cannot be overstated. As long as there has been gender, gender nonconforming and trans people have been around. We are part of every culture on the planet. We were part of every great civilization that the world has ever known. In many ancient and indigenous societies, gender nonconforming people were understood as sacred, as prophetic, as more in touch with the divine. We have always been here. We have contributed to all of the greatest art and literature and science in the world.

We tell trans and gender nonconforming people that they are “new.” That who we are is somehow a modern phenomenon. Robbed of our historical lineage, devoid of our birthright and ancestry, we feel historically alone. We are not alone. We are a powerful group of people who have moved in the world for all of recorded history and beyond. It’s time that we started acting like it.

**THIS IS AS MUCH A COMING-OF-AGE STORY AS IT IS A NON-BINARY MEMOIR. WHAT WAS IT LIKE TO DIG BACK INTO YOUR CHILDHOOD AND EXAMINE THOSE JOYFUL, TRAUMATIC, AND MESSY MEMORIES ALIKE?**

Honestly, writing *Sissy* is the best therapy I’ve ever had. There is something transformative about revisiting your life and rewriting your memories with you as the protagonist, as the hero instead of the victim. In order to write *Sissy*, I had to look some of the more challenging and alienating moments of my life dead in the eye, stare them down until I could figure out what was heroic about how I handled them. After writing *Sissy*, I am more connected to my power than I’ve ever been. I’ve been running around telling everyone in my life to go write a memoir. “It’s like therapy,” I tell my friends, “but you get paid for it!”

**YOU HAVE A GREAT, ALBEIT COMPLICATED, RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR PARENTS AND BROTHER. DID THAT IMPACT HOW YOU APPROACHED SOME OF THE MORE DIFFICULT PARTS OF YOUR STORY?**

Writing this book has brought me even closer to my family. As humans, I think it’s natural for us to spend a lot of energy avoiding confrontation. We leave issues with our family—the painful memories, the challenging moments, the hard parts—unresolved for years until we are somehow forced to confront them. For me, writing *Sissy* was the force that compelled me to open up some old wounds, dress them properly, and find an actual path towards healing.

My family was an integral part of writing this book. My brother and I sat on the phone for hours reminiscing about what we remembered from our childhood, and our memories built off of each other in a beautiful way. For example, I tell a story in the book about the time that my brother and his friends destroyed my only Barbie. My brother had forgotten that story, but when I brought it up with him, it jogged his memory, “Oh yeah, and then Mom made me go to Toys “R” Us with you to buy you a new one!” he remembered. I’d forgotten that part, and without my brother’s help, I wouldn’t’ve remembered that beautiful ending to the story.

The most incredible part of writing the book, though, was reading it to my mom for the first time. When I finished the manuscript, it was right around Mother’s Day, and as my present to my mom, I called her every day that week and read the entire thing to her over the phone. There were moments in the manuscript that were really hard to get through. We had to put it down and take breaks many times because we both were crying so much. But it was beautiful. It was sublime. It was healing and nurturing and powerful. We dug everything up together, held each other when it hurt, and healed. Also, my mom laughed at not one, not two, but seven of the sex jokes in the manuscript, which was a huge point of personal pride for me.

Even my dad, who had the most difficulty learning to affirm my gender (you can read all about that in the book), has come around in a major way. My editor recently mailed twenty copies of the book to my house for me to give to family and friends. My dad could not stop gushing about how

proud he was to receive that box. His pride in my work is more whole and complete than I ever imagined possible. I'll always be grateful for that.

**AS A GENDER NONCONFORMING ADULT, WHAT ADVICE DO YOU HAVE FOR PARENTS OUT THERE WHO ARE RAISING YOUNG CHILDREN? WHAT DO YOU WISH YOUR PARENTS WOULD'VE DONE DIFFERENTLY?**

I don't fault my parents for how they raised me. They were doing the best that they could in a world that didn't teach them how to fully love and affirm a kid like me. But I do wish things could've been different.

The first thing that I want to tell parents is that, if you don't heal your own gender-based trauma, you will pass it along to your children. We grow up in a world where everyone has gender-based trauma. My parents were no exception to this rule. My mom was a tomboy who grew up in Danville, Virginia, a city where "being a proper woman" was part and parcel of every social institution. Like so many young women, she was socially coerced into a femininity that she didn't entirely want and had to give up the more masculine parts of herself. It was hard on her. It hurt. And so when she was confronted with a gender nonconforming kid like me, her instinct was to protect me from that same shame and stigma at all costs.

**"PARENTS WHO DON'T TAKE THE TIME TO PROPERLY EXPLAIN GENDER TO THEIR CHILDREN, IN ALL ITS FACETS AND DIMENSIONS, IN ALL OF ITS COMPLICATION AND NUANCE, ARE FAILING THEIR KIDS, FAILING THE TRANS COMMUNITY, AND SETTING UP THEIR CHILDREN TO LEAD LESS FULFILLED LIVES."**

My dad was similar. Growing up in a working class, immigrant, rust belt family, my dad was raised under a version of masculinity that left little room for sensitivity or femininity. When he had a gender nonconforming kid, he had to face all of his own demons and trauma anew. He had to contend with all of his gender-based insecurities through me. That process was hard. At times, that process was traumatic for both of us.

The bottom line is that parents who take the time to heal their own gender-based trauma and insecurities are better parents. Healed parents are better equipped to affirm their children, regardless of gender.

The other thing I'd like to tell parents is that, even if your child is gender conforming, it is your responsibility to teach them about gender nonconforming and trans people. It's your

responsibility to tell your kid that it's perfectly natural to be trans, that gender nonconforming people—like all people—deserve to be treated kindly and with respect. Parents who don't take the time to properly explain gender to their children, in all its facets and dimensions, in all of its complication and nuance, are failing their kids, failing the trans community, and setting up their children to lead less fulfilled lives. We can never overestimate the power of teaching tolerance to our children. When we teach our kids to be more empathetic to trans people, we teach them to be more empathetic to themselves.

**MANY OF YOUR EXPERIENCES WITH IDENTITY OCCURRED IN THE SOUTH AND WITHIN THE METHODIST CHURCH. WHAT ROLE DID RELIGION PLAY IN YOUR UPBRINGING AND YOUR GENDER IDENTITY? WHAT DO YOU HOPE READERS WITH SIMILAR BACKGROUNDS GET OUT OF YOUR STORY? ARE YOU STILL INVOLVED WITH THE CHURCH?**

There's this idea that queer and trans people who grow up in the South or within the church must inherently be traumatized by those places. That we cannot be Southern and self-actualized. That we cannot be part of a church community and wholly (holy?) ourselves. I built my gender in the South. I built my gender in North Carolina. My queerness started in the Methodist Church, because the church was the only place in my childhood where my femininity was treated with kindness.

I find great inspiration in the teachings of Jesus and in the spiritual traditions of queer theologians. I still go to my childhood church every time I'm home. I sit with my mom in the third row from the front, we take communion together, we hold hands during the sermon, and we always stick around for at least a half an hour after service saying hello to people and visiting with our pastor.

I think that we have an obligation to tell more Southern queer stories. I think that we have an obligation to tell more rural queer stories. I think that we have an obligation to tell more stories that center on queer people in communities of faith. For queer kids

growing up in the South or the Midwest, for trans teens growing up in the church, the damage often starts with the idea that you are trapped, that you can't be happy where you are. That needs to change, and it's why I wrote *Sissy* the way that I did. I wanted to be sure that I owned every facet of my identity, the Southernness of it, the queerness of it, the inconsistency of it, the religiosity of it, all of it.

**AS A TRANS PERSON, YOU'VE BEEN VISIBLE IN THE PUBLIC EYE FOR ALMOST 4 YEARS, INCLUDING HAVING A REALITY TELEVISION CREW FOLLOW YOU AND YOUR FAMILY FOR MTV. WHAT HAVE THE PAST FOUR YEARS BEEN LIKE FOR YOU AND YOUR FAMILY? WHAT CHALLENGES HAVE COME WITH INCREASED VISIBILITY?**

I'm getting used to being publicly visible as a trans person, but it wasn't always easy. The most difficult thing about becoming visible was all of the expectations that I built up around it. I thought that being in the limelight would automatically mean feeling better, would mean healing, would mean some level of protection from the discrimination and harassment that gender nonconforming people continue to face. But the reality of visibility is much, much more complicated.

With greater visibility came problems that I didn't anticipate. People began looking to me for answers that I didn't always have. They started asking things like "how did you learn to love yourself?" or "How did you become so confident in your gender?" when the truth is that I haven't completely figured out how to love myself, that I am not always confident in my gender. I'm still very much a work in progress, but the moment that you're publicly visible, people assume that you sort of have it figured out. Early in my career, I thought that I owed people answers to those types of questions about "how I figured things out." But the older I get, the more I'm learning that it's okay to be honest. It's okay to tell people that I'm still figuring my shit out. It's okay to tell people that I have days when I still struggle with my mental health. It's okay to tell people that I have days when I still feel seriously insecure. Visibility doesn't change any of that.

Visibility can even make some of that stuff harder. For me, one of the greatest challenges that's come with visibility is maintaining body positivity. Everywhere I turn in Hollywood or in fashion or in the entertainment industry or on Instagram, I'm inundated by people who have bodies that are deemed more attractive than mine. I dress around it, but I have a belly. I have body fat. I jiggle when I jump. I am hairy and jiggly and gender nonconforming and for a feminine person to be those things on Instagram is pretty unheard of. It is hard to maintain my self-esteem when I see people who are gender conforming getting so much for doing so little. It is hard to maintain my self-esteem when I see people who are traditionally attractive getting so much

for doing so little. I want a trans community that practices body positivity, but right now the only trans people I see who are publicly visible have traditionally attractive bodies, bodies that are thin and curvy in all the right places. I want a queer and gay community that practices body positivity, but every time I go to a gay bar, I feel like a failure simply for not having abs. I work on body positivity every day. And some days, I don't win. Some days, scrolling past one too many pictures of models or shirtless guys, I still spiral into self-loathing. It's unfinished business for me, but I'm trying to be more honest about it with the world.

**SISSY IS SO MUCH ABOUT THE CHALLENGES OF YOUR PAST, BUT WHAT ABOUT TODAY? WHAT CHALLENGES DO YOU FACE AS A GENDER NONCONFORMING ADULT?**

Being visible as a trans person doesn't protect you from harassment or discrimination. You still have to navigate the real world. Between Instagram pictures and photo shoots and life on set, you still have to be a real person. Which means being stared at, being heckled, and not always feeling safe in public. Public safety is one of the biggest obstacles faced by gender nonconforming and trans people. Even something as simple as taking a walk around your neighborhood can become a dehumanizing experience.

The other week, I decided to go to Burger King for some French fries. I went through the drive thru to order my meal. When I pulled around the back of the restaurant, there were three eighteen-year-old guys loitering in the parking lot. I prayed and prayed that they wouldn't notice me, that they wouldn't see my dress or my lipstick or my necklace or my earrings, that they'd leave me alone. But they noticed me. And they walked over to my car yelling "Dude that's a MAN" and "Do you see what the fuck he's wearing?" and "Fucking faggot." They started pounding on the windows of my car, demanding my attention, demanding that I acknowledge their insults. I wanted to drive away but I couldn't. There were two cars in front of me and one behind. So I just had to sit there while they degraded me. I just had to sit there, trapped, while one of them pulled out his phone and began filming me, asking "What the fuck are you?" over and over. I prayed that it wouldn't escalate. That they wouldn't key my car or smash my windows or beat me up or worse. I sat there terrified. I told myself not to cry. I told myself that if I cried or showed weakness things would only get worse. Two excruciating minutes later, the car in front of me finally left. As I drove away, one of them yelled "Yeah get THE FUCK out of our neighborhood, tranny!" When I got home, I tried to eat my food but the tears came first. I cried and cried and cried. My mascara mixed with tears and ran in smears down my cheeks.

It's difficult to share things like this publicly. I try to pretend like the harassment that I experience on a weekly basis just isn't happening. But if we don't speak up about it, it'll never change. So the older I get, the more I'm trying to



speak up. I am imploring the world to do better. We have to teach kids that it is not okay to harass gender nonconforming people. We have to intervene when we see someone being harassed. We have to stop this.

**OBVIOUSLY, FASHION PLAYS A HUGE ROLE IN THE BOOK, BUT WHAT ROLE DOES FASHION PLAY IN YOUR LIFE TODAY? WHAT WOULD YOU TELL PEOPLE ABOUT THE POLITICAL POWER OF CLOTHING?**

People have two assumptions about fashion and clothing that are blatantly incorrect. One, that fashion is elite: synonymous with capitalism, the one percent, and wealthy people. Two, that fashion is “vapid,” “hollow,” or “apolitical.”

When I put on a dress, I am putting on a revolution. Wearing garments that are historically understood as “feminine” is a gesture of rebellion, a fuck you in the face of those who seek to suppress the brilliance of human expression. I pay a price for my rebellion. Navigating the world in a dress, the stares and heckling and attention are relentless. People respond to my revolution and are polarized by it. They either join up, cheering me on, or seek to stifle it. The process of learning to wear lipstick for the first time wasn’t “just for fun,” or “an experiment.” It represented a lifetime of healing, summoning all of my courage to join the trans revolution that I so desperately needed. Clothing, accessories, and makeup are more political than we ever give them credit for.

I believe that fashion is not just for wealthy people. Fashion is for everyone. The most brilliant garments I own are not from high-end designers. They are hand-me-down shorts that I got from friends in college, hand-me-down green glass jewelry that I inherited from my friend’s grandmother, sequined dresses from the ’80s that somehow ended up at a Goodwill and then in my closet, clip-ons that I found for a dollar at the Elkhorn flea market in rural Wisconsin. I don’t really like expensive clothes. I don’t like new clothes. They have no history, no legacy, no sense of place or story. They’re hollow. The greatest fashionistas in this world, the most brilliant stylists on the planet, are not rich. They are working-class gender nonconforming people who pull together incredible looks for under \$10, they are queer people who make their own clothes.

**“WHEN I PUT ON A DRESS,  
I AM PUTTING ON  
A REVOLUTION.”**

**YOU MOVED TO LOS ANGELES NOT TOO LONG AGO TO START OUT IN THE TV AND FILM WORLD. WHAT’S IT BEEN LIKE TO NAVIGATE HOLLYWOOD AS A NONBINARY PERFORMER AND PRODUCER? WHAT ARE YOU WORKING ON NEXT?**

Hollywood is having something of a “trans moment” right now, but the reality is that Hollywood’s trans moment doesn’t often include people like me. For now, the rule in Hollywood is that if you’re gender nonconforming, if you don’t pass as either a man or a woman, there are no roles being written. Directors aren’t envisioning roles for people like me. Parts aren’t written for nonbinary actors. Even roles that are written in a gender-blind way generally go to someone who conforms to the gender binary. Hollywood is still very broken and has rampant gender problems that make it really difficult for me to get work as a nonbinary actor.

Thankfully, there are some happy exceptions to this rule. Recently, I booked a role as a nonbinary character in a forthcoming season of a Netflix/Dreamworks animated project. Working with the folks at Dreamworks has been a delight, and it turns out that I adore doing voice-over. I couldn’t ask for a more incredible, queer-affirming creative team to work with.

But if I want to play a nonbinary role in a major television show or film, I’m going to have to write it myself. So that’s what I’m doing! I’m a big believer in setting ambitious goals: my goal is to pitch five shows featuring gender nonconforming lead characters in the next three years. I figure that if I pitch that many, at least one of them will get picked up to series and shazam, we will have a show on a major network with a gender nonconforming main character (hopefully one that I can portray)! I’ve already been part of pitching one show—and have a pilot script in development for it with Hulu—and I’m now working with Legendary Television to develop *Sissy* as a TV series starring me. So I’m two for five; I have three more shows to go before completely and irreversibly queering television forever.