

Note:

I pull heavily from my experience as a Trans person on the internet in this essay, but I am well aware that the different types of bigotry and harassment I describe are in no way unique to only Trans individuals. As a matter of fact, I also find almost the exact same types of problems within communities of individuals with Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) / alters, as a part of that community myself. However, Trans issues are what I am most familiar and comfortable speaking on due to my own education and experience.

Secondly, much thanks to my brilliant partner Jack for looking over this piece with me and helping me develop and polish my ideas more, as he so often does.

- I -

Definitions and Cultural Context

In contemporary discussions of cringe, there are at least two definitions of the phenomena implied within; one of which seems to take a backseat in political spaces. Let's start with what I consider to be the more conventional definition:

According to Melissa Dahl in her book *Cringeworthy: A Theory of Awkwardness*, cringe can be described as forced self-awareness: "The moments that make us cringe are when we're yanked out of our own perspective, and we can suddenly see ourselves from somebody else's point of view." In day-to-day conversation, I believe this is the more common understanding of the experience of cringe. The feeling of cringe socially serves to enforce appropriate behavior, working as an emotional self-punishment to social taboo.

On the internet, however, I believe there is a noticeably more aggressive understanding of cringe, which I would even say can be entirely described as *contempt*. This understanding of cringe seems to have popularized during the anti-SJW / anti-feminist era of the internet, starting with Gamergate in 2012, and reaching its peak in 2016 with cringe compilations¹ of feminists spreading over social media platforms. If one takes a peek at the most popular cringe-critical subreddits or even watches a cringe compilation, they can expect to certainly find those from marginalized identity groups – sometimes being loud, or socially taboo, yes – but oftentimes just living their lives or documenting their experiences earnestly. It is clear that to some, the existence of minorities – those of different body types, sexual and gender minorities, and even social justice activists – is considered cringe, especially if one chooses to move through the world with visible confidence. This tendency of using cringe content as a political tool to socially punish and shame minorities is probably the reason progressive spaces tend to find such rhetoric distasteful—perhaps rightfully so.

Yet, cringe is not an experience reserved for the contemptuous right, nor is it necessarily contemptuous. It remains a tool of self-policing of behaviour in the hands of all different types

¹ A video or collection of clips which are deemed cringe, oftentimes centered around a group of individuals: e.g. Feminists

of people. So then, what makes the difference? How can we responsibly experience cringe? Or is it simply something that should be eliminated entirely?

- II -

Internalization and Process

Perhaps due to the base, emotional nature of cringe, you wouldn't be surprised to find a tendency towards blatant hypocrisy in cringe-critical online spaces. Indeed, it seems unacceptable, apparently, for a Trans person to be gender non-conforming, but also unacceptable for them to be gender stereotypical. It is unacceptable to try too hard, but it is an offence to all Trans people if one shows no effort. This is because, as much as certain people in a hate-movement may pretend that their ideology is one of criticism, its true message is *Don't Exist*. Preferably, one would not be Transgender, Disabled, a Person of Color, or any kind of minority at all.

As speculating about the inner feelings of specific individuals is an unproductive framing of discussion, let's instead imagine a type of individual you might find on the internet—focusing on their actions to characterize them. There are many who make their careers off of criticizing their own marginalized community², often bullying specific individuals within it to further their agenda. Let's say, in this scenario, such a content creator is a Transgender individual who makes money off of harassing other Transgender people online. They might then try to justify it by saying that everyone they bully is doing Transness *wrong*. Yet, wouldn't it make more sense to look at their actions to understand what they believe, than to take at face value what they say to defend their said actions? How does making a spectacle of the vulnerability of a young Trans person, whom you deem confused or insincere, help them? It is almost redundant to point out that Trans people who make cringe content about other Trans people (especially to a morbid level) don't just hate those who are doing it *wrong according to them*, but that they hate Trans people, period. It is a difficult contradiction to be Trans and hate Trans people, so the endless train of criticisms are an attempt at bargaining this inner-conflict. This doesn't seem unlikely when the issue of internalized bigotry is well documented in Feminist and Queer theory.

The core situation which prompts the feeling of cringe is the realization that an individual (including oneself) views themselves differently from how they truly appear. As such, people will often feel embarrassed for those who have a misplaced confidence in a specific area, such as contestants in a talent show. Indeed, the vulnerability and earnestness of revealing that they even thought they are good enough to be up on that stage is what exposes many people to criticism and cringe. Bigotry works similarly. The idea that a fat person, visibly Queer person, or a Disabled person has the audacity to think that they are good enough to be themselves in public or on the internet is simply unfathomable to a bigoted mind. Confidence makes a prejudiced mind deeply uncomfortable. The only appeasement to bigotry is the dimming of one's self-actualization to match the views of others. For victims of bigotry, they have no choice but to be audaciously and unwaveringly *oneself* in order to thrive.

² In my time, the biggest Trans cringe-critical creators I knew were Kalvin Garrah and Blaire White

Cringe, shame, or embarrassment can be a powerful moment of vulnerability when one can see themselves through the eyes of another, gaining a perspective on the true nature of their behaviour. Yet, from this, there are two different questions we can ask. On one hand, one could ask, who must I become to appease others? This is the path of internalizing the prejudices of others without introspection. Alternatively, we can ask ourselves who *we* want to be. If one is able to meet this enormous question with some honesty, they could then use the feeling of forced self-awareness to be closer to their aspirations. In this sense, I believe earnestness to be the only way out of cringe which doesn't involve self-betrayal.