

Nonbinary

Life outside the trans umbrella

By Jo Trigilio



Credit: Meriel Jane Weissman

Nonbinary, genderqueer, pangender, agender, genderfluid, genderless, both/neither, ambigendered, androgynous, neutrois. While the term “trans” has made its way into mainstream media, these are terms that are rarely seen or heard. They refer to people who cannot understand or describe their gender as man or woman, masculine or feminine.

“I describe my gender as transmasculine nonbinary,” says Gary, a graduate student who also performs as a bearded drag queen. “Although I have a tendency toward feminine expression, clothing, and mannerisms, neither male nor female identities work or resonate for me.” CJ, an artist and social worker in the Boston area describes her gender as genderqueer and androgynous. “Neither gender feels comfortable to me. Somewhere in the middle feels best. But I don’t feel like half girl and half boy. I’m neither. My gender is something else.”

The term nonbinary refers to forms of gender that do not conform to the rules, regulations, and norms of the binary (man/woman) sex/gender system. Nonbinary people describe their gender as fluid, multiple, hybrid, often using creative and clever terms to describe their unique form of non-normative gender. Their gender, presentation, behavior, and mannerisms are constituted by a context-dependent blend of femininity, masculinity, androgyny, and queerness. Many are not concerned with being “misgendered” because neither gender in the binary applies – there is no correct gender for them. In fact, some nonbinary people reject the notion of gender identity altogether. They are not interested in constructing yet another gender identity.

Breaking the rules of the binary sex/gender system comes at a price. People who enact nonbinary gender experience harassment, violence, and discrimination at the same rate as transgender people, and in some cases at a higher rate. A 2008 study conducted by The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and The National Center for Transgender Equality found that gender-variant respondents who checked “Gender Not Listed here” were at a higher risk for discrimination and violence than transgender respondents who identified as men or women. Despite their significantly higher level of education, “Gender Not Listed” respondents lived in the lowest household income category at a higher rate (21%) than trans respondents that identified as men or women (14%). Similarly, “Gender Not Listed” respondents reported higher rates of physical assault due to bias (32%) than their counterparts (25%).

Why do we rarely hear about nonbinary forms of gender? A major reason why the existence of nonbinary people has been invisible is that they have been subsumed under the trans umbrella for at least two decades. Since the term “transgender” emerged in early 1990s, it has been used as an umbrella term to include transsexual, transvestite, cross-dresser, butch, drag queen, genderqueer, androgynous, bigender, and pangender. The concept is used to describe a spectrum that ranges from transsexuals who have sex reassignment procedures with the goal to pass as the “opposite” sex to gender-nonconforming individuals who resist reference to the binary.

Although many gender-variant people have found a home in trans identity, the broad scope of this concept presents challenges for

those who cannot explain their gender expression in terms of transition from one gender to another. “Trans” is a Latin prefix meaning “across” or “on the opposite side.” Mainstream discourses on “transgender” place emphasis on sex and gender transitioning, making forms of non-transitional gender variance invisible. Most people who enact nonbinary gender do not desire to transition from one gender to another. Nonbinary people may modify their bodies using hormones or surgery in order to feel more comfortable, but not for the goal of living as the other gender. Many nonbinary people experience themselves as always already gender variant or nonconforming.

“There have been times when I have considered going on hormones,” Gary says, “but I don’t want to be a woman. I don’t want to go from one side of the binary to the other. I just want to look more feminine. Transitioning would make my gender more readable, as something that makes sense to people, but is that really my goal?” CJ’s perspective on transitioning

is much like Gary’s: “I would like my body to be more agendered-looking, but I don’t want to be a man. I don’t identify as trans because I don’t want people to think that I want to be a man.”

Nonbinary forms of gender are plagued by what gender scholars call “the problem of intelligibility.” Recognizing someone’s gender is a necessary condition for almost all social interaction. As CJ reports, “In everyday social interactions, people constantly try to name me as male or female.” We have a lack of tolerance for ambiguity in general, and gender specifically. A certain level of gender variance is tolerated in mainstream society, as long as we can understand a person in reference to the binary system. It is much easier to make sense of a masculine woman or a birth-assigned male who has transitioned to a transwoman than to understand someone who is agender, genderless, or pangender. CJ continues, “Even many people in the queer community cannot understand why I don’t identify as male or female.”

Our understanding of the world is limited by language, and we have very little language for understanding people and human bodies without a gender. Gary, who sports a beard, makeup, and feminine clothing says, “I’m aware that people often view me as spectacle. People probably don’t understand my gender. Sometimes it’s fun to be confusing, but it is also unfortunate to not be recognized as how you feel yourself to be.”

When asked what they like about their nonbinary gender, both Gary and CJ spoke about openness and freedom. Gary explains, “I like that my gender is messy, that I don’t feel fixed in one identity or the other. I feel open about how I can express myself.” CJ described nonbinary identity as “being open to experiencing things without a prewritten way to feel, think, or be. What I am supposed to be like, what roles in relationship look like – it’s all open to creativity.” ●



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