

Foreword

From Genderqueer to Nonbinary to . . .

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BACK IN THE 1990s, I started using the term “genderqueer” in an effort to glue together two nouns which seemed to me to describe an excluded middle: those of us who were not just trans, but also queer: the kind of gendertrash that transgressed the natural boundaries of transgender, those whom society couldn’t digest. A prominent gay columnist promptly attacked me for “ruining a perfectly good word like ‘queer.’”

Then Joan Nestle, Clare Howell, and I used the word for the title of our anthology of emerging young writers. And there it sat. I don’t recall anyone actually picking it up or using it. Eight years later at Creating Change—an LGBTQ leadership conference—I saw a sticker someone has posted that read, “A Genderqueer Was Here!” I thought, “Well that’s interesting. Someone is actually using it.” And so it begins.

Fast forward about ten years and I was reading Matt Bernstein’s anthology *Nobody Passes*. In it writer Rocko Bulldagger bemoans the term’s very existence, declaring, “I am sick to death of hearing it.” Such is the arc of new ideas.

I suspect the same thing is about to happen with nonbinary.

For the public, that arc probably began in a town hall in London, when a twenty-year-old student came out to President Obama as nonbinary: “I’m about to do something terrifying, which is I’m coming out to you as a nonbinary person. . . . In the UK we don’t recognize nonbinary people under the Equality Act, so we literally have no rights,” Maria Munir said. Obama, one of our most hip and cosmopolitan

presidents ever, still had no idea what Munir was talking about. Befuddled, if well intentioned, he relapsed into his LGBTQ talking points, which really had very little to do with it.

He is not alone in his confusion. As nonbinary comes to the fore, it will challenge everything we currently think about bodies, sexual orientation, and gender, almost all of which depends implicitly or explicitly on the binary. One can only hope almost none of it survives. If I am nonbinary, can feminism—the politics of women—still represent me? Can I enter women-only spaces, or men-only meetings? Can I be gay, straight, or bisexual? Here language fails, the entire discourse on gayness and sexual orientation collapses.

The same thing is going to happen with transgender. The “trans” in transsexual was always about moving from one thing to another. A person was going *from* male to female, or vice versa. This conception was more or less grafted onto the newer term “transgender.”

It’s an overused truism that “transgender” was intended as a broad “umbrella term” for all those who are gender nonconforming. Yet there are limits: transgender itself is interpreted by some in terms of two binary genders that one is traveling between or else not conforming to. For others (especially transsexuals), being transgender implies a sense of conflict between one’s inner gender identity and birth sex as male or female. In this way, transgender often unintentionally reinforced and reified the same binary of sexes and genders that makes outcasts of transpeople in the first place.

But what if one is not traveling anywhere? Or is entirely off the map of intelligible binary genders?

Familiar transgender concerns get scrambled quickly. For instance, we now accept that transgender women are women and can use the women’s bathroom. But what bathroom do we want nonbinary people to have the right to use: Both? Neither? And what sex marker do we want them to be able to put on their ID? Both? Neither? A new one?

You can see where this is going. Neither our language nor our politics is suited to accommodate this, and we’re going to have to do a lot of rethinking.

All of which is long overdue. Binary gender regimes maintained themselves with a few rules: everyone must be in a box; there are only two boxes; no one can change boxes; no one is allowed between the boxes. Since no one really fits the perfect masculine or feminine ideals, these rules end up being terribly oppressive to almost everyone, and

more so to those who are genderqueer. One can only hope the emergence of a nonbinary movement is the first step in finally retiring it.

Munir was actually way ahead of a curve that is only now coming into view. It's not that nonbinary people have no rights (although they don't and they must), it's that—like Obama—most people have no idea that they exist or what they are.

What comes next, what takes its place, is going to be very interesting. It will be years before even something as simple as the use of the pronouns *they*, *them*, and *their* works its way through our language and our brain-pans and become standard. It will be even longer before people like Munir feeling emboldened, coming out, and stepping off the binary become widespread and commonplace.

And that deeper social change that really opens a profound and enduring space for those who are nonbinary to live fully with rights, dignity, and understanding will take even longer.

Fortunately, until then, we will have this excellent new anthology to guide us.

