

The Nonbinary Experience

By Rowan Collins

The Western world often has no place for someone like me. Someone who lives outside the labels of male and female. Not only in presentation, in the clothes I wear, but in a deeper way. I've been asked a lot of questions over the years, "Aren't you worried your pronouns will be confusing?" "Why can't you just be a girl and not live by gender norms?" "What's in your pants?". Some of these questions, I can answer based on feelings and experience. For most of them, I have to look to experts. Biologists, theologians, anthropologists, sociologists... people who have studied the theory of gender for years, and have evidence and history supporting what they say. To begin, it's important for people to understand that while new to the western world, nonbinary people have existed for thousands of years, starting as far back as ancient Mesopotamia. Sumerian and Akkadian tablets from the 2nd millennium BCE and 1700 BCE describe how the gods created these people, their roles in society, and words for different kinds of them. Writings from ancient Egypt said there were three genders of humans: males, *sekhet*, and females.

There are also abundant examples of non-western cultures having identities outside male or female. Māhū ("in the middle") in Hawaiian and Tahitian cultures are third gender persons with traditional spiritual and social roles within the culture. The māhū gender category existed in their cultures during pre-contact times, and still exists today. In the pre-colonial history of Hawai'i, māhū were notable priests and healers, although much of this history was elided through the intervention of missionaries. The first written Western description of māhū occurs in 1789, in Captain William Bligh's logbook of the *Bounty*, which stopped in Tahiti where he was introduced to a member of a "class of people very common in Otaheite called Mahoo... who although I was certain was a man, had great marks of effeminacy about him."

The Public Universal Friend (1752 - 1819) was a genderless evangelist who traveled throughout the eastern United States to preach a theology based on that of the Quakers, which was actively against slavery. The Friend believed that God had reanimated them from a severe illness at age 24 with a new spirit, which was genderless. The Friend refused to be called by the birth name, even on legal documents, and insisted on being called by no pronouns. Followers respected these wishes, avoiding gender-specific pronouns even in private diaries, and referring only to "the Public Universal Friend" or short forms such as "the Friend" or "P.U.F." The Friend wore clothing that contemporaries described as androgynous, which were usually black robes. The Friend's followers came to be known as the Society of Universal Friends, and included people who were black, and many unmarried women who took on masculine roles in their communities.

Despite the extensive history of nonbinary genders, people often take issue with the supposed lack of scientific, especially biological evidence. People cite that one can only have XY chromosomes, or XX, and that determines your gender. This is actually incorrect. One can have combinations such as XXY, or XXX, or even simply X. And people with XX chromosomes can still have male genitalia (and vice versa). Chromosomes are not the only make up of DNA, a fact that people often overlook.

It's also worth noting that our entire concept of gender is a social construct, because most of our existence is a social construct. The idea that dresses are feminine clothing is almost exclusively Western. In Japan, they used to (and still do in some cases) wear kimonos regardless of gender, and in most Arab countries, men wear long dress-like clothing. Many cultures and ethnic groups have concepts of traditional gender-variant roles, with a history of them going back to antiquity. For example, Hijra and Two-Spirit. These gender identities and roles are often analogous to nonbinary identity, as they don't fit into the Western idea of the gender binary roles.

So what is it like, denying the Western idea of gender identity? I had never considered that until I came out here. Until I started talking to people who have never met someone like me. I have found that people often underestimate the fear that comes with being openly non-binary. The average lifespan of a transgender person is 30-32 years old. 41.8% of non-binary youth have attempted suicide at some point in their lives. Every time I go online, every time I introduce myself to someone, every time I ask someone to call me by my preferred pronouns, I risk harassment, degradation, and verbal or physical assault. While the risk of physical assault is less on the internet, anonymity creates a safe place for people to verbally attack others with no consequences. I've learned the hard way not to go into comment sections, no matter how supportive the post may be. Seeing vomiting emojis and false biologists flaunting their eighth grade knowledge is rather draining. Instead, I take solace in the fact that neutral pronouns are becoming much more widely accepted. About 61% of Americans aged 18-29 said they would feel comfortable referring to someone using gender-neutral pronouns. Merriam-Webster named singular 'they' as their word of the year in 2019, with a 200% increase in people looking it up.

This leads into another source of controversy, the use of the singular "they". This debate actually started in 1795. Before then, Singular they had already been the standard gender-neutral pronoun in English for hundreds of years. However, in 1745, prescriptive grammarians began to say that it was no longer acceptable. Their reasoning was that neutral pronouns don't exist in Latin, which was thought to be a better language, so English shouldn't use them, either. They instead recommended using "he" as a gender-neutral pronoun. This started the dispute over the problem of acceptable gender-neutral pronouns in English, which has carried on for centuries now. It's often posited that using 'they' singularly is grammatically incorrect, and therefore invalid. This is utterly untrue. In fact, most people use 'they' singularly without even

realizing it. For example, if you found someone's wallet, without knowing their identity, you'd say "we should turn this wallet in, THEY'LL be wanting THEIR wallet back". However, until recently, this was considered grammatically incorrect. Until the MLA (the Modern Language Association) changed that in 2019. It is now considered proper grammar to use singular they/them pronouns in scholarly writing.

The current wave of activists fighting for wider acceptance of gender neutral terms and individuals can be best described in a tweet by Ayishat Akanbi: "Millennials aren't creating new gender identities, they're only giving language to ones that have always existed under the burden of shame". In a new age of open-minded people, that is changing, and you all sitting here, listening to me, is a part of the force lifting that burden.

Statistics on suicide rates/life expectancy of trans people:

<https://www.hrc.org/blog/new-study-reveals-shocking-rates-of-attempted-suicide-among-trans-adolescen>

<https://www.npr.org/2012/10/01/162100680/no-more-lying-law-bolsters-transgender-argentinnes>

Gender-neutral pronoun statistics:

<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/09/05/gender-neutral-pronouns/>

History of nonbinary genders:

https://nonbinary.miraheze.org/wiki/History_of_nonbinary_gender#Eleventh_century

Biology:

<https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/voices/stop-using-phony-science-to-justify-transphobia/>