

From readings of queer theory, I gathered that general identities often create an artificial coherence within a group. In the LGBTQ community, one that I belong to, which includes people of all ages, genders, colors and socioeconomic positions, I realized that not everyone has the same goals in mind in regards to “equality.” To some, it might mean assimilating into “normal” culture, and to some it might mean rejecting “normal” as a notion entirely. Through the course of my research and animating, I have examined the “aim” that my activism seeks to attain, and realized that I do not hope for a future that has no labels, where every gender identity or sexuality can be seen as “normal.”

Gender identity and queerness is a personal and political topic; every day, the cultural reinforcement of the gender binary seems increasingly obvious and restrictive. Simultaneously, I feel as though our culture is on the brink of collectively seeing “gender” in a new way. As a queer, nonbinary person, I am interested in how ideas about the gender binary intersect with youth culture, and how the future of gender may appear. I wanted to capture this moment in time where social media has made information so accessible, and where young people are far more accepting of indefinable grey areas. Still, it’s a dangerous world for gender nonconforming people, and there is much change left to be desired. I hope for a future where young people are encouraged to be critical and can safely reject and redefine normativity and systems that don’t serve them.

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**Abstract:**

In this paper, I discuss the intersections of youth culture and LGBTQ communities. I chose to study this topic because I'm curious about how American youth seem to increasingly reject traditional thoughts on the binary gender system, and how this cultural shift manifests itself in a flexibility of language and a social media dialogue. This emergence of gender nonconforming youth culture makes its home largely on internet spaces, and sometimes deepens existing generational rifts, resulting in political tension in areas such as bathroom laws. I want to know what the future of "gender" is. I looked specifically at English linguistic development, studies of biological sex, current events, social media, and Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*.

## Who Am I, Why Now?

A few months ago, I found myself sitting beside one of my very best friends on the downtown-bound A train trying to define my gender identity. Being gay wasn't too difficult to explain, but gender identity was much more confusing (admittedly to both of us) and more difficult for me to put in simple terms. I don't remember what I told her, but it was most likely that I wasn't sure how I identified. She assured me that she would love me "as a boy, a girl, or whatever". Then, as an afterthought, she added: "But being a girl is cool, you know," as if that reminder would convert me back to full-fledged womanhood. What is "womanhood", anyway? If I had not been told that I was girl all of my life, would I have ever felt "like a girl"? If I wasn't treated the way that "women" are treated; catcalled, generalized and misrepresented, if having a period or growing boobs wasn't heralded as "womanhood" by everyone, and if everything I did, wore or said wasn't constantly gendered, would I feel any *innate* gender identity at all? Where does gender identity come from and how can one know that any part of one's identity is "real" or "innate" and not simply a byproduct of time and place and the constant projection of all of those around us?

I grew up "feeling like a girl", or at least living my life comfortable with that label. It was very simple. I only knew of two options, and I certainly knew I wasn't a boy (I never liked boys), so I felt like I just was who I was. I knew girls could have long hair or short hair, they could wear dresses or cargo shorts, and I rotated through all of those. It wasn't until around tenth grade that my understanding of gender really began to change. I came out as a lesbian, and suddenly I felt no pressure to look a certain way, to present in an "attractive" way to get the attention of guys, which I suppose I was doing unconsciously for quite some years. Although I wasn't taking note at the time, in retrospect I believe that this shift happened because I suddenly felt like no "rules" applied to me. I had grown up thinking I was a straight girl, and once I realized I wasn't straight, it was almost as if the model of what I was supposed to be had shattered. I felt free to drop the performance of both heterosexuality and "girlhood". I still struggle to define precisely what this means to me, but because I no longer defined myself opposed to men (unconsciously or otherwise), gender stopped being a defining part of my identity. I read a lot of *Seventeen* and *Teen Vogue* in middle school, and in retrospect I can't believe I didn't realize what these magazines were teaching me. At the time, all of the articles catered to feminine girls who were presumably heterosexual. All of the relationship quizzes were about "how to find out if he likes you back!", and all of the dating articles were about "demystifying the opposite sex". I don't think I realized that these publications were enforcing a divide between two groups- men and women- and I think for a long time I just assumed I fit in with all of the straight, feminine, cisgender girls in the magazines. In tenth grade, I stopped comparing myself to girls around me, no longer seeking approval and validation based on how I presented myself. I began to learn more about the complexities of sexuality and gender, and the question of my own gender identity has floated around in the back of my mind since then. Right now, the Internet has so many resources for people who are trans, nonbinary, or questioning. Perhaps I only notice this plethora of resources now because I choose to see it, or maybe because it's truly a growing movement. I see the shift in my peers as well, and it isn't hard to find a friend who will agree wholeheartedly that "gender isn't even real!" or to complain to about the lack of gender neutral restrooms with. Of course, not everyone lives in the same social climate as I do, and that is part of why the LGBT community carves out so much space online. Social media allows anyone to connect safely and anonymously, and allows access to dialogue that might not otherwise occur in certain areas. So many people nowadays don't identify completely with one of the two traditional

gender options, so it's difficult not to wonder when our mainstream culture is going to reflect that.

I'm lucky enough to be living in a time and place with a lot of potential. An "alternative" sexuality or gender identity (or both) doesn't necessarily mean I'll have a really tough time in school or in the workplace. I consider myself lucky to be supported by my parents and my peers, and I feel profoundly thankful to be in a position not only to accept my identity, but encouraged to explore it and employ it in my art. Social progress is happening at a rapid rate. For example, Harvard University is among colleges that are now allowing students to indicate their preferred pronouns upon registration. This includes options like "ze" instead of the traditional "he" or "her" (NPR). A few years ago I had no idea there were more than two gender identities, and now my mom is having conversations with her friends over dinner about how English is evolving so that "they" is becoming a more acceptable singular, gender-neutral pronoun. As a side note, I am aware that this positivity and openness has a lot to do with my own admittedly narrow perspective and a great deal of privilege. Not everyone lives in a cultural climate that allows them to be open about their sexuality or gender identity, or even in a safe enough place to explore it on their own. On one hand, youth culture seems to be paving the way toward increased visibility and acceptance, but on the other hand, it is not without pushback. Violent hate crimes against trans people, especially trans women of color, are happening more than ever (Cox), and many states have recently passed "bathroom laws" that deny trans people access to public restrooms (Berman). Exploring the vast concept of gender is so important to me because every day the cultural reinforcement of the gender binary seems increasingly obvious and restrictive. Simultaneously, I feel as though we as a culture are on the brink of collectively seeing "gender" in a new way. So, what does the future of gender look like?

## **Gender Trouble**

To answer this question, I first looked into notable gender theorists of the recent past, focusing on philosopher Judith Butler. As stated previously, we live in a culture that is deeply rooted in a two-gender binary system. It is apparent in everything from pronouns to the separate departments in nearly every clothing store. This structure, in the words of Butler from her work *Gender Trouble*, "imposes an artificial binary relation between the sexes, as well as an artificial internal coherence within each term of the binary" (19). In other words, because our world is laid out in these two categories, it's difficult not to buy into those differences. Not only does the binary assign and establish differences between "men" and "women", but it assumes (and perpetuates the idea) that all "women", for example, have a lot more in common with one another than is actually possible, given the sheer number of people in the world and all of factors that shape someone's identity, including race, class, religion, and age.

Butler's stance is clear; she believes that gender is purely a "performance" and a social construct, and she aims to shed light on what forces establish and regulate these two restrictive categories and why one might want to be free of them. She suggests that the gender binary is inextricably linked with compulsory heterosexuality, because without a rigid and defined gender binary heterosexuality couldn't exist. Therefore, she explains, gender identity requires a "defining other" or "a differentiation from the opposite gender". In other words, "one is one's gender to the extent that one is not the other gender, a formulation that presupposed and enforces the restriction of gender within the binary pair" (Butler 22). Without a clear "other gender" or "opposite gender", how does one define one's own gender? This implies that a social structure where both "men" and "women" can wear the same clothing, take care of children, and have the same jobs, much like many parts of our country, is a threat to the entire binary system.

In many urban and liberal areas in the United States, being gay is not as radical or “alternative” as it once was. Gay marriage is now legal nationwide. Only 48% of Americans age 13-20 identify as exclusively heterosexual (Tsjeng). This information points toward a more sexually accepting future as these young people grow up and move into the workplace. Perhaps this movement away from “exclusive heterosexuality” also signifies the beginning of the end for the binary system of gender. Butler further explains the link between gender and sexuality by saying, “where desire is heterosexual”, it “differentiates itself through an oppositional relation to that other gender it desires. The internal coherence or unity of either gender, man or woman, thereby requires both a stable and oppositional heterosexuality. That institutional heterosexuality both requires and produces the univocity of each of the gendered terms that constitute the limit of gendered possibilities within an oppositional, binary gender system” (22). When “men” and “women” are considered equal in terms of character and ability, and when social climates allow more fluidity and room for all people in terms of gender expression, career paths, and family models, the “defining Other” becomes less and less defined. Lots of people will agree that not everyone “fits in” with the box that's assigned to them at birth in the traditional sense (think girls in pink princess dresses and boys in blue camo playing with trucks) and not every family enforces these stereotypes. Still, to some it's groundbreaking, wrong, or even scary to think that we don't live in a world where you need to define your gender at all.

### **Identity Beyond The Binary**

There is a difference between simply not conforming to one's gender stereotypes- for example, identifying as a girl but enjoying typically “masculine” things like sports- and being trans or nonbinary. That is, being nonbinary or trans is not identifying (completely or partially) with the gender assigned to you at birth. In other words, being nonbinary is having a gender identity that defies the typical “male, female” binary, or not having a gender at all . Io Tillett Wright is an artist and activist, and the creator of The Self Evident Truths Project, photographic documentation of 10,000 people in the United States who self-identify anywhere on the LGBTQ spectrum, in terms of sexuality, gender, or both. In addition to starting this project with the aim of highlighting the diversity of the LGBTQ community and humanizing us, Tillett Wright is also vocal about her experience being gay and gender nonconforming. In one interview she explains, “I had like a whole gender revelation a couple of months ago where I was like, ‘I think I'm a man on the inside’. Like, I know what my body is and I'm clear on what my genitalia is, but I'm also fairly clear in the fact that if the distinction between gender bending or rule breaking gender-wise is how you feel on the inside, then I'm transgender because I feel like a man on the inside. Yet, because of the way I was raised and never forced into dresses and all of that shit, I don't have the narrative that apparently goes with being transgender where you hate your body. I don't hate my body at all” (StyleLikeU). When I was growing up, I knew trans people, but only in the binary sense. I knew of people who were assigned male at birth who were women, and I knew of people who were assigned female at birth who were men. Like Tillett Wright, I was only exposed to the “transgender narrative” of feeling “trapped in the wrong body” and transitioning from one binary gender to “the other”. Perhaps that is why I never considered that I might not identify completely with the female gender that was assigned to me at birth. I never hated my body, I never felt trapped. I only recently started noticing when a stranger assumes my gender based on my physical appearance and calls me something like “miss”. It was shocking to learn that many people feel the same way, like they don't necessarily identify with the gender they were assigned, but feel comfortable existing in some sort of grey area.

Activist Tyler Ford is open about their experience being nonbinary and how binary thinking is ingrained into our culture. They explained, “as we grow up, we are groomed to more fit our certain box. Female turns into girl turns into woman, but it all starts with your body being labeled as “female”. That’s not where we should start, we should start with a blank slate and we should grow up to be people and human beings” (StyleLikeU). As wonderful as it would be for many to grow up without the restrictions and stereotypes that go along with a gender label, is this vision honestly possible? After all, when people approach babies on the street, the first thing they often ask the parent is whether the baby is a boy or a girl, that is, if it’s not already painfully obvious in the color coding of the child’s clothing and accessories.

In some places, however, some parents do start with a “blank slate”. In Sweden, for example, some parents choose to raise their children gender neutrally in an effort to avoid negative and restrictive stereotypes. Stockholm's first gender neutral pre-school opened in 2010 and, as of last year, a gender neutral pronoun officially exists in Swedish (Hanna). Some countries like Australia, Germany and Sweden even offer a “X” option on legal documents like passports for intersex individuals or people who prefer to keep their gender neutral (Owais). It’s hard for me to imagine this type of reform happening here in the United States, considering by law a person is either male or female on all legal documents, and this status affects everything from parenthood status to access to public accommodations (Bell). How can gender neutrality be a reality if our legal system and mainstream media still only account for two genders?

### **The Spectrum of Biological Sex**

Not only does our legal system not account for nonbinary people, but it blatantly ignores the existence of intersex people. Even for those who are “biologically essentialist”, or people who believe that gender is a real, concrete physical difference between two groups, regardless of presentation or identity, it is important to note that not everyone’s anatomy fits neatly into the two prescribed boxes, either.

I am of the belief that “biological sex” and “gender identity” are slightly outdated terms, especially when considering the expanding definition of “trans”, when not everyone feels the need to change their body in order to identify in a certain way or be whatever gender they are. Of course, gender reassignment surgery is the right option for many, but it is expensive and therefore unavailable to many people in the trans community (Adler). Just because a person's body does not physically match a certain ideal should not mean that their “gender identity” and “biological sex” are at odds. Why should any one body part be gendered, anyway? Even if you were to look at people through a binary lens, to pretend all “female” bodies are the same would be, returning to *Gender Trouble*, forcing an “artificial internal coherence” onto a group of vastly different bodies. In general, thinking of bodies as “male” or “female”, regardless of whether one is accepting of a full spectrum of identities, means that one is looking at the world in a biologically essentialist way, and a very binary way. Laverne Cox is an actress and advocate for trans rights, notably being the first trans woman of color to grace Time Magazine’s cover in June of 2014 (Steinmetz). She has helped teach the idea that a preoccupation with anatomy, surgery and physical transitions is objectifying to trans people and prevents more earnest and important conversations. She also notes that “there’s not a universal trans experience”, and every trans person is an individual, especially when it comes to feelings on body image and the decisions that sometimes stem from that (Wilstein).

Most people are taught from a very young age that physical differences are the clearest distinction between “male” and “female”, or that genitalia are essentially gender. Not only does this idea not account for many nonbinary people and trans people cannot or choose not to

medically transition, but it erases intersex people and reduces all people to their genitals, which is weird and dehumanizing. Regardless, many people believe that there is some scientific truth to gender that will override anyone's experience, identity or expression. Biologically, is there actually a compelling case for the binary, two-gender system, or is that, too, a flawed product of heterocentric, binary thought? In fact, biologists and scholars alike agree that the concept of biological sex is "much more complicated than it at first seems", according to Claire Ainsworth, writer for Nature International weekly journal of science. Traditional biology teaches that two X chromosomes means female, and one X and one Y means male. However, this thinking is highly simplistic. In actuality, as many as one in one hundred people has an intersex condition or DSD (disorder of sex development) which means that while their chromosomes may say one thing, their anatomy, gonads or cells say something different (Steadman). So, even in strictly scientific and biological terms, not all people can be neatly sorted into "male" or "female", and there is indeed a great deal of gray area. Ainsworth notes that "these discoveries do not sit well in a world in which sex is still defined in binary terms. Few legal systems allow for any ambiguity in biological sex, and a person's legal rights and social status can be heavily influenced by whether their birth certificate says male or female". If the binary system is largely rejected by youth as unnecessary and restrictive, and on top of that holds no true scientific verity, what stands in the way of a future that is genderless, or at the very less, more fluid? For some, gender is such a defining factor that a disruption of the binary would leave them apparently unaware of how they should behave or interact with people. Target recently made moves to phase out gendered signage on kids' toy and bedding aisles, and this change was covered by Fox News in a segment in which reporters appeared appalled and confused as to how one would shop without distinct pink and blue sections. One commentator seemed upset that it would be more difficult to know what toy to buy a child if they aren't sorted by gender. This line of thinking is, again, buying into an artificial coherence among socially constructed groups and assuming that all "boys" are interested in only a certain kind of toy, and vice versa. If a genderless toy aisle could cause certain people such anguish, how would they receive the idea of an "X" on legal documents in place of "m" or "f"?

### **Linguistic Development**

In English, gendered language acts as a subtle but powerful regulatory mechanism for the binary system. Even seemingly harmless gender distinctions in everyday language enforce and unnecessarily divide the limits and constraints of all genders. Lynn Liben, a psychologist at Penn State, has spent years researching the social effects of gendered language. Liben found that when teachers "emphasize a gender divide in speech", like addressing the group as "boys and girls" instead of gender neutrally, students "adopt more intense stereotypes about what boys and girls are supposed to do", including supposed interests, roles in a home or family, and perceived abilities, like the stereotype that only boys excel at physical activities. In addition, children will also become less likely to play with children of a different gender at recess" (Hess). Kids notice from a very young age when adults split them into groups based on assigned gender, and they are quick to learn the same method of categorization. Perhaps language is the first and most important way that this divide is taught to children. For lots of gender nonconforming, trans and nonbinary folks, language is one of the most obvious ways that they're misgendered. After all, it's hard to avoid gendered language, from pronouns to honorifics to the connotations that words like "pretty" or "handsome" hold. Luckily, English develops rapidly to reflect our culture, with text shorthand and slang being a notable example of how quickly language evolves. It must be possible, then, that English has the potential to move toward flexibility and neutrality.

The use of non-traditional pronouns has become more popular in recent years. It's not unusual for teenagers to put their pronouns in their bios on social media sites like tumblr or instagram (Hess). Many "neo-pronouns" have been created, like "xe, xir" or "ze, zir", for example, to replace the traditional "he, his" and "she, her" pronouns. Arguably the most popular is the singular "they, them" pronoun, which was voted as the word of the year for 2015 by the American Dialect Society (Nunberg). Despite this nice (and belated) validation, this pronoun is frequently met with resistance, especially from grammar enthusiasts. Linguist Ben Zimmer explains that while "according to standard grammar, "they" and its related forms can only agree with plural antecedents", it still seems to best fill the void of a gender-neutral singular third-person pronoun, especially because it is already employed unconsciously in everyday situations (Zimmer). Aside from being appropriate in situations where a person's gender is unknown or unimportant- "Who left their bag here?"-, it is wonderfully helpful for people who don't feel comfortable with "he" or "she". Even facebook gives you the option to select "they" as your pronoun, so when friends go to your page, it will say things like "Write on their wall" or "Wish them a happy birthday" (Nunberg). While this may come across as very modern to some, authors (including Shakespeare, Austen, Chaucer and Shaw) have been using "they" as a singular pronoun for centuries (Hess). This is important to note when people argue against gender neutral pronouns by saying that they are "grammatically incorrect" and "a product of political-correctness", because, in fact, many globally famous authors have had no problem putting singular "they" to use long before the argument of political correctness began. In my opinion and from my personal experience, when people use "proper grammar" as an excuse to refuse to use someone's pronouns, it is less about English and more about being uneasy about gender neutrality and preferring to disrespect trans people instead of stepping outside of their comfort zone.

### **Social (Media) Revolution**

The Internet is an incredibly valuable space for self-exploration, gender-expression, and an easy way to connect to a community. This is especially true for individuals who are not open about their sexuality and/or gender, for reasons ranging from comfort to safety. Having an online community means that the LGBT community is accessible to everyone, and anyone can be apart of it anonymously if that is the safest option for them. Social media is a powerful tool for idea sharing and community-building, and has been a great force for the normalization of LGBTQ people because it's easier for us to be visible online. For example, on social media platforms like Tumblr, "it's now typical for young people to pin their preferred pronouns to their pages" (Hess). In other words, because social media is so youth-driven, it's easy to carve out a space where things like pronouns are not assumed and a spectrum of identity is embraced, when in real life, most adults are unaware of these social movements (Adler).

Of course, progress is never linear. North Carolina made headlines recently when they passed House Bill 2 (HB2), a law requiring people to use the public restroom coinciding with the gender on their birth certificate, regardless of how they live or present themselves. Bruce Springsteen even canceled a recent North Carolina tour stop to boycott this bill (Berman). On one hand, it seems as though progress is unmitigable and unstoppable, and on another, people face violence every day just for trying to pee. According to Carl Siciliano, executive director of the Ali Forney Center for LGBT homeless youth, "trans kids face an enormously disproportionate burden of the bigotry and the hostility and the hatred that's directed against the LGBT community," and seven out of the nine homeless youth who have been murdered in New York since he ran the center were transgender (Adler). Indeed, while pronouns and gender-

neutrality are sometimes dismissed by some individuals as “new-wave” or “too politically correct”, trans and gender nonconforming youth are the target of most anti-LGBTQ violence, and trans safety should take priority over linguistic integrity, regardless.

## **Conclusion**

As a non binary person and a queer person, it is impossible for me to have a hope or a prediction for the future that is not grounded in my own identity and specific point of view. I hope for a world that is safe and accepting for all LGBTQ people, and one where our culture is celebrated and not appropriated. I hope for an increase in all kinds of LGBTQ media representation and visibility, especially of the trans, nonbinary and gender nonconforming variety. In an interview by Janet Mock, Laverne Cox talked at length about her thoughts on the upsides and shortcomings on media visibility specifically for the trans community. She acknowledged the power that media has to elevate diverse and honest trans stories, which in turn have the power to “create critical awareness”, “ignite conversations” and “change people’s hearts and minds”. She maintains the stance that visibility alone cannot end violence and discrimination, but I hope that it will lead us all in the right direction.

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