

The Open University's repository of research publications  
and other research outputs

## Non-Binary Activism

### Book Section

How to cite:

Bergman, S. Bear and Barker, Meg-John (2017). Non-Binary Activism. In: Richards, Christina; Bouman, Walter Pierre and Barker, Meg-John eds. *Genderqueer and Non-Binary Genders*. Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 31–51.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© 2017 The Authors



<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

[http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1057/978-1-137-51053-2\\_3](http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1057/978-1-137-51053-2_3)

<https://www.palgrave.com/gb/book/9781137510525>

---

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's [data policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

---

## **Non-Binary Activism**

S. Bear Bergman and Meg-John Barker

This chapter introduces the burgeoning non-binary gender movement. Meg-John Barker writes the first half of the chapter, which is a summary of non-binary activism with a particular focus on the UK as an illustrative example of the kind of work that is happening in this area. Meg-John begins by charting some of the history of the non-binary movement, and overviews the areas which have been focal points for activism so far. They also set out some of the main forms of activism which are currently taking place in the UK context, and look to what the future might hold. Meg-John then passes over to Canada-based trans activist S. Bear Bergman who is more familiar with the US and Canadian context. Bear provides a personal reflection on experiences of activism around non-binary identity, in relation to language in particular. This is an important area of focus given the binary gender nature of the English language (and many others), and the commonality of linguistic misgendering and microaggressions in the everyday lives of many non-binary people.

### **Overview of Non-Binary Activism So Far**

*Meg-John Barker*

#### **A new movement?**

In the period when we were writing this chapter in early 2016, two events happened in the UK which raised important questions about how new the non-binary movement is: Kate Bornstein's series of public talks and performances across UK cities in February (Saner, 2016), and the combined non-binary conference and trans studies SexGen North seminar at Leeds University in March (Vincent & Erikainen, 2016; Hines, 2016).

The non-binary gender movement is frequently hailed as a new phenomenon, with people pointing particularly to the facebook gender 'revolution' in 2014 as a starting point of public attention (Richards, 2014). Certainly google's Ngram viewer, which graphically represents the frequency of mentions of words or phrases in published texts, provides no results for 'non-binary gender' prior to its current endpoint of 2008, whilst 'transgender' sees a huge climb from nowhere the late 1980s to 2008, and 'genderqueer' a small increase from nothing in the mid 2000s.

However, key figures in trans activism since the very earliest days of that movement, Kate Bornstein and Stephen Whittle, both made very similar points at the 2016 events: that trans activism had been challenging the gender binary right from the start, and that they certainly hadn't experienced their own genders in purely binary ways (see Bornstein, 1994; Whittle, 1996). This perhaps explains why, although not always entirely comfortable, the reception of non-binary activism by broader trans activism has so far been a good deal more welcoming than the historical reception of bisexual activism by broader gay/LGB rights movements (see Barker et al., 2012).

The discussion which followed at these events encouraged us to hold various paradoxes and tensions in relation to the non-binary moment. We need to understand its place as a very new social movement which, like the asexual movement (Carrigan, Gupta & Morrison, 2013), has only reached critical mass in

recent times due to the potentials afforded by the internet for collective engagement across geographical location. At the same time we need to trace non-binary activism back through time via the trans, queer, and bisexual movements which have been challenging binaries of sex, gender, and sexuality for some decades now (e.g. see Queen & Schimel, 1997; Nestle & Wilchins, 2002; Bornstein & Bergman, 2010), and through earlier forms of feminism which did similar things (e.g. see Bem & Lewis, 1975; Piercy, 1976). Similarly, it's important to chart the longer histories of non-binary gender experience which have often been erased through the centuries (Gust, 2016) in order to legitimise the movement and to provide some sense of liveable non-binary lives. However it is also important to recognise the risks that doing so may involve reading the present onto the past in problematic ways analogous with viewing culturally diverse gender experiences through the colonising lens of western understanding (see Vincent & Manzano-Santaella, this volume).

### **Areas of focus**

Thus far the following areas seem to have formed focal points for non-binary activism. I've provided UK references to exemplify each of these, which I will go on to discuss further in the next section (note I've dated these as 2016 if they are an ongoing website or blog, but many began before this date).

- Conducting and reporting grass-roots research with non-binary people to obtain statistics regarding the prevalence of non-binary people and the challenges they face, in order that activism can be grounded in persuasive evidence (e.g. Titman, 2015; Barker & Lester, 2015; Valentine, 2016; Breaking the Binary, 2016).
- Campaigning for the rights of non-binary people to self-determine their gender and to have their gender accurately recorded in documentation which displays gender, such as passports and organisational records, or to have gender markers removed entirely from such documentation (e.g. Elan-Cane, 2015; Stonewall, 2015; Non-binary Inclusion Project, 2016; see also Clucus & Whittle, this volume).
- Activism around language to ensure that, for example, the gender neutral title 'Mx' is provided as an option by banks and other institutions, and that social and mainstream media include gender neutral pronouns such as 'they', and recognise these as legitimate. (see Tobia, 2015; Bennet, 2016).
- Awareness-raising and education to improve cultural understanding, and media coverage, of non-binary people. (e.g. Trans Media Watch, 2014; All About Trans, 2016), and to encourage better support of those whose gender intersects with other marginalised identities (e.g. Choudrey, 2016).
- Providing support and resources for non-binary people themselves (e.g. Beyond the Binary, 2016; nonbinary.org, 2016a; Gendered Intelligence, 2013; Lester, 2015; Genderqueer in the UK, 2016; Non-binary Scotland, 2016; Breaking the binaries; 2016; Howitt, 2016).
- Working towards non-binary people being provided with easy access to NHS medical services through General Practitioners and Gender Identity Clinics, and helping those who are currently struggling to access such services (e.g. Action for Trans Health, 2016; Large, 2016; Lorimer, 2016; Non-binary Inclusion Project, 2016; see also elsewhere in this volume).
- Attempts to make public spaces such as toilets and changing rooms gender neutral or non-binary inclusive (see Sanghani, 2016; Cambridge University Students' Union LGBT+ Campaign, 2016).
- Provision of non-binary specific, and non-binary inclusive, social and supportive spaces (e.g. Wotever World, 2016; Non-binary London, 2016; Open Barbers, 2016; Be: Non-Binary, 2016).

- Inclusion of non-binary people in wider trans activist campaigns around topics such as prisons (see Lees, 2016), hate crime (see Galop, 2011), and asylum seeking (see UKLGIG, 2016).

### **UK non-binary activism so far**

It's important to point out that one exciting feature of non-binary activism is the tendency to challenge and blur other binaries beyond just the gender binary. For example, the *Moving Beyond the Binaries* conference (Vincent & Erikainen, 2016) was an explicitly activist-academic event (Barker, 2016) including many speakers who occupied multiple positions as activists, academics, and artists, and spoke about these intersecting roles in their presentations (e.g. White, 2016; Lester, 2016). Many non-binary activists also weave together their personal stories with their activist campaigning in innovative ways, and this is important in providing those who access their blogs, videos, podcasts, music, and artwork with visible models of what a liveable non-binary life might look like (e.g. Lester, 2015; Howitt, 2016). Increasing numbers of therapists, medics, and psychiatrists are open about their own non-binary identities and/or are working directly towards better services for non-binary people (e.g. Lorimer, 2016, and hopefully the practitioners included within this volume). Indeed I asked on the UK Pink Therapy facebook network last year whether any other non-binary therapists would be interested in forming a supportive group, and this group is already at 13 members.

There have been many key moments in UK non-binary activism in recent years, where non-binary voices have explicitly be included in wider debates and trans campaigning. Here is just a brief selection of these.

In 2014 the then LGB charity Stonewall conducted a trans consultation prior to becoming trans-inclusive, and non-binary people were one of the groups who were specifically consulted with a separate non-binary specific event (Stonewall, 2015). They now include non-binary identified staff within their organisation.

In July 2015 Ashley Reed launched a 30,000 signatory online petition asking the UK to join the growing list of countries (Ireland, Italy, Argentina, etc.) which allow trans people to self-define their gender rather than having to pay to go through a Gender Recognition Panel. The petition was inclusive of non-binary people. The Ministry of Justice responded that it would not open up certification to non-binary people because only 'a very small number of people consider themselves to be of neither gender' and 'we are not aware that that results in any specific detriment'. Thus the twitter hashtag #specificdetriment was born out of non-binary people contesting this response, and two large surveys were quickly conducted to provide evidence regarding the prevalence of non-binary gender and the specific detriments experienced by non-binary people (Beyond the Binary, 2015; ScottishTrans.org, 2015). CN Lester and I were asked by a group of trans activists to attend a meeting with the Ministry of Justice, where we presented the initial qualitative Beyond the Binary findings along with previous data regarding the relatively high levels of mental health difficulties amongst non-binary people (Barker & Lester, 2015). Valentine (2016) has since analysed the largescale quantitative study that ScottishTrans.org conducted which found that, for example, over three quarters of non-binary people

avoid situations for fear of being misgendered, outed, or harrassed, two thirds feel that they are never included in services, and very few feel able to be out at work.

In January 2016 the UK House of Commons Women and Equalities Commission published the Trans Equality Report, which was the result of a long inquiry that included evidence from many non-binary individuals, activists and experts. The report called for more extensive investigation into the needs of non-binary people, for a gender X option to be added to passports (in addition to M and F) and to move away from gender markers on passports long-term, for non-binary people to be protected from discrimination under the gender equality act, and for updating of trans medical procedures to be inclusive of trans people (see also NHS England, 2015).

Of course this is just the tip of the iceberg of UK non-binary activism given that much of it occurs behind the scenes of such public engagements: in social media networks; in quick responses to relevant media representations or smaller policy decisions; and in bottom-up work that happens in classrooms, workplaces, LGBT+ centres, and other communities and institutions across the country. Recent examples that I'm personally aware of include: calls for the Memorandum of Understanding of UK therapy organisations against conversion therapy to be inclusive of trans and non-binary people; and engagement with a series of proposed national and international non-binary related programming in an attempt to shift the narrative from debates over the existence of non-binary people, to a focus on diverse non-binary experiences with no requirement of a 'counterpoint' position from somebody who is sceptical about non-binary gender. In Wales, a group of young people, including non-binary teens, have co-produced an illustrated guide on how young people can creatively and safely campaign for gender equity and diversity. As part of this, they included The Rotifier Project, in which a Gender Play teacher workshop and assembly was designed by young people to demonstrate the diversity of gender, and how damaging it can be to box people into gender categories that don't fit. They created various playful activities including GenderSnap cards with examples of gender diverse creatures, characters, and historical figures<sup>1</sup>.

### **Where do we go from here?**

Regarding the future, it was clear from discussions at the Leeds conference and seminar (Vincent & Erikainen, 2016; Hines, 2016) that it is vital to campaign across many of the existing strands of activism simultaneously. Both Valentine (2016) and Whittle (2016) stressed the remaining dangers inherent in endeavouring to openly occupy a non-binary gender (in terms of expression and identity), and the particularly risk for those whose gender intersects with other marginalised identities and experiences (more feminine-presenting, BAME, disabled, intersex, and working class non-binary people, for example). Therefore any moves towards legal recognition of non-binary gender need to be combined with increased education and cultural awareness, and protection from discrimination and harassment for non-binary people.

---

<sup>1</sup> The Rotifer Project will be included in a case study in the forthcoming guidance AGENDA: A Young People's Guide on Making Positive Relationships Matter (Cardiff University, NSPCC, Welsh Women's Aid, supported by Children's Commissioner for Wales and National Assembly for Wales)

From the outside, the non-binary movement is often regarded as both ‘young’ and ‘difficult’. Discussion of non-binary gender has often occurred within considerations of controversial social justice campaigning tactics such as ‘no-platforming’, insistence on provision of ‘trigger warnings’, and ‘call-out culture’. These, in addition to campaigns around changing language, are often presented as threats to ‘freedom of speech’ and as ‘political correctness gone mad’ (see Serano, 2013). It behoves those reporting on non-binary gender to shift the discussion from these kinds of often intergenerational feminist/LGBT+ rights debates; to challenge the polarised right/wrong thinking that often pervades these kinds of debates more broadly (Barker, 2014); to represent the diversity of non-binary people and issues; and to celebrate the multiplicity of activism which are currently happening, as evidenced from the review above.

At the same time it would be helpful if this burgeoning non-binary movement took up Whittle’s (2016) call to learn from its history and to also challenge any tendency to polarise into a false binary between ‘us’ (young, non-binary, right) and ‘them’ (old, binary, wrong). Intersectionality is another major challenge in this movement given that currently it is probably only safe for those of us occupying a high degree of cultural privilege to be ‘out’ publicly and/or in our work environments. This can mean that the main visible non-binary people end up being wealthy, highly educated, middle-class, white, often masculine-of-centre, and not visibly disabled. Coupled with the limited young, white, thin image of androgyny provided by the fashion industry, this can mean that non-binary people who do not fit this mold feel excluded from communities, and that young people are presented with a very limited sense of what their options might be as a non-binary person - or whether this is even open to them. As with other movements it’s necessary for those in positions of power to do what they can to provide space, support, and visibility to more marginalised groups, and to step back where possible in order to allow more of a diversity of voices to speak.

There is also a lot to be done in terms of connecting up non-binary activism worldwide, campaigning within the UN universal human rights framework and the Council of Europe transgender resolution (which are inclusive of non-binary people), and learning from countries and cultures outside the west which are often further forward in terms of recognition of non-binary genders (for a review see nonbinary.org, 2016b; see also Vincent & Manzano-Santaella, this volume). Finally, in terms of the strategies we employ we would do well to heed the advice of our NB genderqueer elder ‘Auntie Kate’ (Bornstein, 2016) to do what we need to do to become more comfortable in the world, but in so-doing, ‘don’t be mean’.

At this point in the chapter I would like to hand over to another long-term trans activist, writer, performer, and advice columnist, S. Bear Bergman, for a more personal reflection on one aspect of non-binary activism.

### **Non-Binary Language**

*S. Bear Bergman*

In the fall of 1993, I got into my first argument with a university professor about the validity of gender-nonspecific pronouns. It was the first of what would prove to be many, in the fullness of time. Freshly

emboldened by the smartypantses with whom I spent hour upon hour chatting on the proto-internet, I explained to my professor that - in actual fact - there was nothing grammatically incorrect at all about my use of these tiny words. I smugly recited stanzas of Chaucer to prove the pedigree of *hir*, and then held my head up and praised the activists of the Usenet who had invented *ze* to go with it. Finally, I offered up my cloth-bound, Routledge-imprinted copy of *Gender Outlaw* by Kate Bornstein, sprinkled with gender-nonspecific pronouns that I hoped to validate by their obviously-serious serifs (and my identity right along with them). My professor, a second-wave feminist lesbian in linen separates, shook her head slowly. "Those are not words, and" she said, wrinkling her nose in evident distaste, "*that* is not a woman."

Two things struck me in the exchange, and continued to reverberate for decades: one, that this professor arrogated to herself the right to decide whether a word was "real" or not, and two, that she obviously felt this power extended to my gender identity (and that of many other people). The rejection of the word contained the rejection of the concept in general and me in particular. While I enjoy a little bit of dictionary fetishism as much as the next writer, her pronouncement (and the judgment it contained) were obviously not about the words themselves, but about her disapproval of the ideas they contained – underlined by her choice to disdain both the words with which Bornstein made it clear that *ze* did not, indeed, consider herself a woman and also *hir* gender presentation (including *hir* grandly goth-infused high-femme sartorial pronouncement). People who experienced themselves as neither men nor women, or as some combination thereof? Absolutely not, she said, putting her sensible Danskø clog down firmly on the subject.

(Twenty-two years later the Oxford English Dictionary announced that it had included gender-nonspecific pronouns and honorifics, including the singular *they*, to their volumes. When I finished happy-dancing around the kitchen, I indulged at length in a fantasy in which I could buy, carefully highlight, and then mail several hundred volumes to university professors around the world, marking the page with an engraved card reading only "neener, neener, neener.")

For two decades, I campaigned on behalf of the words *ze* and *hir* with varying degrees of success. I used them as my personal pronouns and insisted that people use them for me in professional contexts, which meant negotiating that whoever introduced my talk had to read them out loud in front of students (and listening to the speaker make a tremendous performance of how uncomfortably they sat in their mouths, most of the time). I pressed newspaper and periodical writers and editors to use them in articles about me, with little success. I wrote entire books using gender-nonspecific pronouns, and after going ten rounds with my publisher that they really were real words and that I really did have the right to use them, fully half of the reviews my books received acknowledged that I preferred "invented" pronouns or "neologisms," and then proceeded to ignore them and use either a masculine or feminine pronoun set to refer to me. This choice was recently, unpleasantly, echoed in a stunningly dismissive New York Times article about Sasha Fleischman of Oakland, California, a genderqueer-identified teenager who was set on fire while riding a city bus. Evidently not content to let physical violence stand on its own, the Grey Lady perpetrated its own linguistic violence with the following parenthetical:

"(Telling Sasha's story also poses a linguistic challenge, because English doesn't offer a ready-made way to talk about people who identify as neither male nor female. Sasha prefers "they," "it" or the invented gender-neutral pronoun "xe." The New York Times does not use these terms to refer to individuals.)" (Slater, 2015)

Let that sink in.

In her book *Epistemic Injustice*, British philosopher Miranda Fricker describes two particular kinds of oppression related to knowledge and language. One, she terms *testimonial injustice*, which she describes as the occasion upon which prejudice causes a person to be perceived as a less-credible or non-credible in their capacity as an informant. The other is *hermeneutical injustice*, where a person has no way to describe their experience because the conceptual frame doesn't exist yet due to their stigmatized or disempowered identity (Fricker, 2007). When I read her book I nearly yelped in recognition of the experience so robustly described.

Making matters worse, it's not just the cisgender professors and copyeditors of the world who have fought me on every instance of gender-nonspecific pronouns. There are plenty of transgender and/or transsexual identified people who rail against the non-binary among us with just as much vigor. Their conviction, frequently offered at some volume, is that the idea of non-binary gender cheapens and distracts from their journey. That it's all right to move from the known and identified category of man to that of woman, or vice versa, but not to add additional categories and certainly, absolutely, not to say that the categories are flawed, optional, or even discussible. Though these people may have trans identities or medical histories, their relationship to gender is heteronormative and binary – there are two choices, world without end, amen.

This too, I would argue, is a matter of language as much as it is of anything else; in Fricker's parlance, trans people suffer a hermeneutical injustice and non-binary-identified people suffer it doubly. The cultural imagination about anyone who is not normatively gendered – trans bodies, trans identities, relationships, sex, geography, conflict, priorities – is substantially influenced by what we can talk or write about intelligibly. Since the modern conversation about gender identity is heavily medicalized, with brief and chilling digressions into legal terminology, so too are most of the words we have for ourselves and each other medical or legal legacy words, designed to reinforce the "normal" and shine the cold light of inquiry upon the Other. We have no playful language, no admiring language, no nuanced language and no affirming language. Instead, we're stuck with obviously false dichotomies like "pre-op" and "post-op" that have lead the entirety of cisgender humanity into the beliefs that a) all transgender experience is defined in relationship to surgical procedures that have existed for roughly 75 years, even though transgender people have existed for millenia and I can prove that and b) that there's a single-opportunity trans medical intervention, somewhat akin to the television show *Pimp My Ride*, where we enter looking one way and emerge entirely different and perhaps with a few things chromed.

What's more, the process of moving away from the medicalized language – which is full of terrible assumptions and worse ideas, but has the virtue of being somewhat familiar to even people who are quite distant from the topic – is messy and contested. There is no trans equivalent of the *Academie Francais*, where a group of people meet, discuss, and decide what new words are actual words and what they mean. This leads to internal conflict and heated debate among trans and non-binary people about what words are best to use, and because those debates are entirely decentralized you could well find yourself using a word you learned in Chicago as respectful and appropriate and being told in Atlanta that you're using oppressive language and to get out. As an educator, I spend a lot of time explaining this: that trans communities have come to a place where we have the cultural agency, finally, to explain and describe our own experiences using our own language, and that while this is a messy and inconsistent process it's also a pivotal (and frankly thrilling) moment in identity development. I have some sympathy for the well-meaning non-transgender people who desperately want to get the lingo right as an act of allyship with trans and non-binary people in this, but it's too important (and too exciting) to rush. If we're going to be able to eventually describe the specific, delicious, varied and nuanced particulars of



our non-normative bodies, experiences, and identities it's going to take some time.

This is true even though the larger cultural imagination, with its limited and limiting understanding of trans and non-binary experiences, can't fathom what we might be taking our time on, or why it could be so important. Most people, especially the able-bodied, have rarely or never had the experience of having bodily experiences for which they have no word, or no word they can stand to use (masturbation stands alone as a frequent exception to this rule). The mental blank spot first gets filled with a placeholder, often "this" or sometimes "that." Then, maybe, it evolves to a shorthand code word, akin to a private joke or with one's self or the kind of idiolects married people inevitable develop over time. But eventually sometimes a moment arrives in which we hear a word for the very thing, and we see ourselves reflected in it. As a non-binary identified person, that was also my experience of gender-nonspecific pronouns. The jolt of understanding, the dawning clarity of why I had shifted with discomfort when spoken about with feminine pronouns but had no especial desire to run to the warm embrace of masculine pronouns all but re-set my skeleton in my skin. Certainly, it shuffled the deck of my locution and dealt me a hand I had never previously understood to be a winner.

Where non-binary identities are concerned, the hermeneutical injustice that applied to trans people twenty-odd years ago still rages, even though trans identities have seen some progress. For non-binary identified – or, to use my current favorite term, enby – people, this is magnified by the fact that while most of everyone except Germaine Greer and Donald Trump are prepared to recognize that trans people do exist these days, the enby population is still struggling up that hill with our glitter in the one hand and our neckties in the other. These days, I deploy the word enby, which is just a pronunciation of the initials NB for non-binary, with casual authority. I neither describe nor explain it unless asked. My part in the evolution of language around enby topic and identities is that I no longer engage in the kind of debates I used to about whether something is or is not a word; I know better now. Of course it's a word, I tell them, just like laser and radar are words, just like we used to fax things and now we google them. I try to not even mansplain about it. But I'm wise to the tactic now, this thing of pretending to have some kind of high-minded linguistic objection to a new concept or idea being expressed in order to conceal a prejudice; I have experienced enough epistemic injustice to name it and stand up for myself and people like me as a legitimate expert on my own identity. With the cultural power I've concentrated as a public intellectual, a cultural worker, and – let us not forget – a white guy now, I have become stalwart in my assertions that people are and can be trusted to be, in the words of educator j wallace skelton, experts on themselves (skelton, 2016). The smokescreen of being challenged about words has given way, and it develops that people are much more hesitant about saying "I think your identity is invalid because it challenges my beliefs about the world," than they ever were about saying "That's not a real word." Go figure.

(This becomes especially clear when an enby person uses the singular they pronoun, and suddenly there emerge strenuous objections to it from people who consistently misuse lie for lay and whose entire previous commitment to grammar expired sometime around the end of sentence diagramming in Grade 10. It would be funny if it weren't so exhausting and demoralizing).

In the twenty-two years between when I started agitating on behalf of gender-nonspecific pronouns and when the OED joined the English language (already in progress) about gender-nonspecific pronouns – anointing them along with the gender-nonspecific honorific Mx. and the word cisgender – there has certainly been some progress in language. The cisgender imagination, and especially that of the gatekeepers of law, medicine, and language whose imprimatur so many things have previously required, is expanding and with it *must* go the language. Even the word cisgender – a word created and deployed

by trans and enby people - now takes a fairly unchallenged place in academia at least (though it apparently upsets a certain subset of people whose gender privilege is so entrenched that they fuss and kick at being named with a word they didn't coin or choose, to whom I say: "Welcome.")

I begin to wonder at this point what will happen next – will the reality of our lives become so present and incontrovertible on the landscape of gender that refusal to use our words will become the last refuge of the bigot? Will there be a backlash against identity politics that causes cis people to insist that they don't see gender and therefore have no need to grapple with it anymore? How will forms, systems, data and codexes of language evolve to capture the nuances of gender identity, and what new points of linguistic friction will each of those solutions inevitable produce? Even for cisgender folks, this is an exciting time indeed.

My friend Scott Turner Schofield, who used to be a performance artist and is now a soap opera actor, which he claims is a lateral move if ever there was one, tells a story I have long enjoyed about needing a particular tool while travelling in Costa Rica. He had no idea what it was called in Spanish, so he went to the hardware store intending to browse the available items and choose the thing he needed. But when he arrived, he discovered that the store was more or less a kiosk, and all of the tools were kept in the back, so a shopper was forced to ask for the thing they wanted and wait for it to be fetched back by the proprietor. Scott, stumped by this turn of events, produced in his limited Spanish the following request: I need the tool for turning with the top that's shaped like the church. After some puzzlement, the clerk laughed, nodded, and came back with what he needed: a Phillips-head screwdriver.

This is exactly, in many ways, where we find the language of trans – and especially non-binary – identities. Without knowing a word for what we need, we approximate based on what we think a conversation partner, reader, lover, doctor, or government official might be familiar with, and we stand and wait wearing our most cheerful and polite smiles while we hope that person will find themselves willing to do the extra work to understand. In the hopeful future, maybe the words of nuanced, descriptive, tender gendered language will be real in our mouths and on our screens. For now we rely on goodwill and creativity to get the job done. The good news is, many of us have a lot of both.

### **Bullet Point Summary**

To summarise this chapter, these are key points to keep in mind about non-binary activism:

- It is not a new thing: we can see the roots of current non-binary activism in the older trans, queer, and bisexual movements, and in some earlier forms of feminism, and it is important to open up intergenerational dialogue so that these groups can learn from one another.
- NB activism overlaps with academic work in its focus on conducting and reporting research with non-binary people so that activism can be grounded in persuasive evidence.
- NB activism often foregrounds campaigns for the rights of non-binary people to self-determine their gender and to have this accurately recorded, as well as campaigns for gender-inclusive language (pronouns, titles, etc.), and making public spaces gender neutral or non-binary inclusive.
- There is also a focus on awareness-raising and education to improve cultural understanding of gender, as well as the provision of support and resources for non-binary people themselves.
- It is important to include non-binary people in wider trans activist campaigns around areas such as prisons, asylum seeking, and - particularly - easy and inclusive access to medical services.
- Non-binary activism needs to be intersectional: recognising that non-binary experience intersects in key ways with race, class, age, geographical location, and all other aspects of identity and

background.

### Further Reading

- Barker, M-J. & Scheele, J. (2016). *Queer: A Graphic History*. London: Icon Books.
- Bornstein, K. (1994). *Gender outlaw*. London: Routledge.
- Bornstein, K., & Bergman, S. B. (Eds.), (2010). *Gender outlaws: The next generation*. New York, NY: Avalon Publishing Group.
- Iantaffi, A. & Barker, M-J. (forthcoming, 2017). *Gender: A Guide for Every Body*. London: Jessica Kingsley.
- Serano, J. (2013). *Excluded: Making feminist and queer movements more inclusive*. New York, NY: Seal Press.
- Wilchins, R. A. (1997). *Read my lips: Sexual subversion and the end of gender*. Ann Arbor: Firebrand Books.

### References

*Note: Unless otherwise stated, all online materials were accessed at the time of writing on 29th March 2016.*

- Action for Trans Health (2016). *Falling through the cracks: Non-binary people's experiences of transition related healthcare*. Accessed via: [www.actionfortranshealth.org.uk](http://www.actionfortranshealth.org.uk).
- All About Trans (2016). *Gender identity: Non-binary*. Accessed from [www.allabouttrans.org.uk/category/non-binary](http://www.allabouttrans.org.uk/category/non-binary).
- Barker, M-J. (2014). Trigger warning: trigger warnings (towards a different approach). *Open Democracy*, 15th July, 2014. Accessed from: [www.opendemocracy.net/transformation/meg-barker/trigger-warning-trigger-warnings-towards-different-approach](http://www.opendemocracy.net/transformation/meg-barker/trigger-warning-trigger-warnings-towards-different-approach).
- Barker, M-J. (2015). *Activist/Academic Space Guidelines*. Accessed from: [www.rewriting-the-rules.com/resources-2/activistacademic-space-guidelines](http://www.rewriting-the-rules.com/resources-2/activistacademic-space-guidelines).
- Barker, M-J. & Lester, CN. (2015). *Non-binary gender factsheet*. Accessed from: [www.rewriting-the-rules.com/resources-2/non-binary-gender-factsheet](http://www.rewriting-the-rules.com/resources-2/non-binary-gender-factsheet)
- Barker, M., Richards, C., Jones, R., Bowes-Catton, H., & Plowman, T. (2012). *The Bisexuality Report: Bisexual inclusion in LGBT equality and diversity*. Milton Keynes: The Open University, Centre for Citizenship, Identity and Governance.
- Be: Non-binary (2016). Trans Support and Development in the North. Accessed from: [www.be-north.org.uk/events/be-non-binary-2016-04-17](http://www.be-north.org.uk/events/be-non-binary-2016-04-17).
- Bem, S. L., & Lewis, S. A. (1975). Sex role adaptability: One consequence of psychological androgyny. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 31(4), 634.
- Bennet, J. (2016). She? Ze? They? What's In a Gender Pronoun? New York Times, 30th January 2016. Accessed from: [www.nytimes.com/2016/01/31/fashion/pronoun-confusion-sexual-fluidity.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/31/fashion/pronoun-confusion-sexual-fluidity.html)
- Beyond the Binary (2015). #SpecificDetriment: what's your response? 15th Septemeber 2015. Accessed from: [www.beyondthebinary.co.uk/specificdetriment-whats-your-response](http://www.beyondthebinary.co.uk/specificdetriment-whats-your-response).
- Beyond the Binary (2016). A magazine for UK non-binary people. Accessed from [www.beyondthebinary.co.uk](http://www.beyondthebinary.co.uk).
- Bornstein, K. (1994). *Gender outlaw: On men, women and the rest of us*. New York: Routledge.
- Bornstein, K., & Bergman, S. B. (Eds.), (2010). *Gender outlaws: The next generation*. New York, NY: Avalon Publishing Group.
- Breaking the Binary (2016). Research and journalism project exploring non-binary gender. Accessed from: [www.breakingthebinary.wordpress.com](http://www.breakingthebinary.wordpress.com).
- Cambridge University Students' Union LGBT+ Campaign (2016). Recommendations: Toilet and changing facilities. Accessed from: [www.lgbt.cusu.cam.ac.uk/campaigns/think/recommendations](http://www.lgbt.cusu.cam.ac.uk/campaigns/think/recommendations).

- Carrigan, M., Gupta, K., & Morrison, T. G. (2013). Asexuality special theme issue editorial. *Psychology & Sexuality*, 4(2), 111-120.
- Choudrey, S. (2016). *Inclusivity: Supporting BAME trans people*. GIRES. Accessed from: [www.gires.org.uk/assets/Support-Assets/BAME\\_Inclusivity.pdf](http://www.gires.org.uk/assets/Support-Assets/BAME_Inclusivity.pdf).
- Elan-Cane, C. (2015). Non-Gendered - Fighting for Legal Recognition. The Huffington Post, 24th December 2015. Accessed from: [http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/christie-elancane/non-gendered\\_b\\_8870260.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/christie-elancane/non-gendered_b_8870260.html).
- Fricker, M. (2007). *Epistemic injustice: Power and the ethics of knowing*. New York: Oxford.
- Galop (2011). Transphobia. Accessed from: [www.galop.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/Transphobia-A4.pdf](http://www.galop.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/Transphobia-A4.pdf).
- Gendered Intelligence (2013). Non-binary gender identities: Information for trans people & allies. Accessed from: <http://cdn0.genderedintelligence.co.uk/2013/02/12/12-35-49-nonbinary0213.pdf>.
- Genderqueer in the UK (2016). All the information you need to be recognised outside of the gender binary. Accessed from [www.genderqueeritheuk.wordpress.com](http://www.genderqueeritheuk.wordpress.com)
- Gust, O. (2016). Non-binary performance through time. *Presentation to the Moving beyond the binaries of sex and gender conference*, University of Leeds, 22nd March 2016.
- Hines, S. (2016). *Trans studies: Reflections and advances*. University of Leeds seminar, 22nd March 2016.
- House of Commons Women and Equalities Commission (2016). *Transgender equality*. HC390. Accessed from: [www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201516/cmselect/cmwomeq/390/390.pdf](http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201516/cmselect/cmwomeq/390/390.pdf)
- Howitt, H. (2016). *Escape the Binary*. Accessed from: [www.escapethebinary.com](http://www.escapethebinary.com).
- Large, L. (2016). Moving towards a non-binary account of gender dysphoria. *Presentation to the Moving beyond the binaries of sex and gender conference*, University of Leeds, 22nd March 2016.
- Lees, P. (2016). Placing a transgender woman in a men's prison is a cruel punishment. The Independent, 10th March 2016. Accessed from: [www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/paris-lee-placing-a-trans-woman-in-a-mens-prison-is-a-cruel-and-unusual-punishment-a6923831.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/paris-lee-placing-a-trans-woman-in-a-mens-prison-is-a-cruel-and-unusual-punishment-a6923831.html).
- Lester, CN. (2015). "Genderfluid is the new black"\*: on the media's non-binary moment. 5th July 2015. Accessed from [www.cnlester.wordpress.com/2015/07/05/genderfluid-is-the-new-black-on-the-medias-non-binary-moment](http://www.cnlester.wordpress.com/2015/07/05/genderfluid-is-the-new-black-on-the-medias-non-binary-moment).
- Lester, CN. (2016). Challenging canonicity: Musicology in trans activism. *Presentation to the Moving beyond the binaries of sex and gender conference*, University of Leeds, 22nd March 2016.
- Lorimer, S. (2016). Transgender equality: Moving away from psychiatry. The Huffington Post, 14th January 2016. Accessed from: [www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/dr-stuart-lorimer/transgender-equality-movi\\_b\\_8977614.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/dr-stuart-lorimer/transgender-equality-movi_b_8977614.html).
- Nestle, J., & Wilchins, R. A. (2002). *Genderqueer: Voices from beyond the sexual binary*. New York, NY: Alyson Publications.
- NHS England (2015). Treatment and support of transgender and nonbinary people across the health and care sector: Symposium report. National Health Service Commissioning Board. Accessed from: [www.england.nhs.uk/commissioning/wp-content/uploads/sites/12/2015/09/symposium-report.pdf](http://www.england.nhs.uk/commissioning/wp-content/uploads/sites/12/2015/09/symposium-report.pdf).
- Nonbinary.org (2016a). Nonbinary gender visibility, education and advocacy network. Accessed from [www.nonbinary.org](http://www.nonbinary.org).
- Nonbinary.org (2016b). Recognition. Accessed from [www.nonbinary.org/wiki/Recognition](http://www.nonbinary.org/wiki/Recognition).
- Non-binary Inclusion Project (2016). Non-binary Inclusion Project. Accessed from: [www.nonbinary.co.uk](http://www.nonbinary.co.uk).
- Non-binary London (2016). *London non-binary/genderqueer meet-up!* Accessed from: [www.nonbinarylondon.tumblr.com](http://www.nonbinarylondon.tumblr.com).
- Non-binary Scotland (2016). Supporting non-binary gender people living in Scotland. Accessed from: [www.nonbinaryscotland.org](http://www.nonbinaryscotland.org).

- Open Barbers (2016). *Queer friendly hairdressing*. Accessed from: [www.openbarbers.tumblr.com](http://www.openbarbers.tumblr.com).
- Piercy, M. (1976). *Woman on the edge of time*. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Queen, C., & Schimel, L. (Eds). (1997). *PoMoSexuals*. San Francisco, CA: Cleis Press Inc.
- Richards, S. E. (2014). Facebook's gender labeling revolution. *Time Magazine*, 19th February 2014. Accessed from: <http://time.com/8856/facebooks-gender-labeling-revolution>.
- Saner, E. (2016). Caitlyn Jenner's got company: meet Kate Bornstein, the one-woman whirlwind who's lived many lives. *The Guardian*, 21st February 2016. Accessed from: [www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2016/feb/21/kate-bornstein-interview-caitlyn-jenner-i-am-cait](http://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2016/feb/21/kate-bornstein-interview-caitlyn-jenner-i-am-cait).
- Sanghani, R. (2015). Why the UK should ditch male and female toilets for 'gender-neutral' loos. *The Telegraph*, 14th December, 2015. Accessed from: [www.telegraph.co.uk/women/life/why-the-uk-should-ditch-male-and-female-toilets-for-gender-neutr](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/life/why-the-uk-should-ditch-male-and-female-toilets-for-gender-neutr).
- ScottishTrans.org (2016). UK non-binary survey. Accessed from: [www.scottishtrans.org/our-work/research/uk-non-binary-survey](http://www.scottishtrans.org/our-work/research/uk-non-binary-survey).
- Serano, J. (2013). *Excluded: Making feminist and queer movements more inclusive*. New York, NY: Seal Press.
- Slater, D. (2015). The fire on the 57 bus in Oakland. *The New York Times Sunday Magazine*, 29th January, 2015 Accessed from: [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/01/magazine/the-fire-on-the-57-bus-in-oakland.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/01/magazine/the-fire-on-the-57-bus-in-oakland.html?_r=0)
- Skelton, J. W. (2016). *Transphobia: Deal with it and become a gender transcender*. Halifax, Nova Scotia: Lorimer Publications.
- Stonewall (2015). *Trans people and Stonewall*. London: Stonewall. Accessed from: [http://www.stonewall.org.uk/sites/default/files/trans\\_people\\_and\\_stonewall.pdf](http://www.stonewall.org.uk/sites/default/files/trans_people_and_stonewall.pdf).
- Stonewall (2016). #specificdetriment. 12th September 2015. Accessed from [www.stonewall.org.uk/our-work/blog/specificdetriment](http://www.stonewall.org.uk/our-work/blog/specificdetriment).
- Titman, N. (2014). *How many people in the United Kingdom are nonbinary?* [www.practicalandrogyny.com](http://www.practicalandrogyny.com)
- Tobia, J. (2015). I am neither Mr, Mrs nor Ms but Mx. *The Guardian*, 31st August 2015. Accessed from: [www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/aug/31/neither-mr-mrs-or-ms-but-mx](http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/aug/31/neither-mr-mrs-or-ms-but-mx)
- Trans Media Watch (2014). *Understanding non-binary people: A guide for the media*. [www.transmediawatch.org/Documents/non\\_binary.pdf](http://www.transmediawatch.org/Documents/non_binary.pdf).
- UK lesbian and gay immigration group. (2016). *Transgender equality inquiry: A 'missed opportunity' for trans asylum seekers*. 14th January 2016. Accessed from: [www.uklgig.org.uk/?p=2101](http://www.uklgig.org.uk/?p=2101).
- Valentine, V. (2016). Specific detriment: A survey into non-binary people's experiences in the UK. *Presentation to the Moving beyond the binaries of sex and gender conference*, University of Leeds, 22nd March 2016.
- Vincent, B. & Erikainen, S. (2016). *Moving beyond the binaries of sex and gender: non-binary identities, bodies, and discourses*. University of Leeds conference, 22nd March 2016. Conference booklet accessed from [www.gires.org.uk/pdfs/Conference%20Booklet.pdf](http://www.gires.org.uk/pdfs/Conference%20Booklet.pdf).
- White, F. R. (2016). Teaching gender, being non-binary. *Presentation to the Moving beyond the binaries of sex and gender conference*, University of Leeds, 22nd March 2016.
- Whittle, S. (1996). Gender fucking or fucking gender. In R. Ekins, & D. King, D. (Eds.). *Blending genders: Social aspects of cross-dressing and sex-changing*. Oxford: Psychology Press.
- Wotever World (2016). *Queer performance and events in London and around Europe*. Accessed from [www.woteverworld.com](http://www.woteverworld.com).