

# CHALLENGING GENDERS

Non-Binary Experiences of  
Those Assigned Female at Birth



An Annotated Anthology

MICHAEL ERIC BROWN AND DAYWALKER BURILL

# **Challenging Genders**

**Non-Binary Experiences  
of Those  
Assigned Female at Birth**

**Michael Eric Brown  
Daywalker Burill**



Copyright © 2018  
Michael Eric Brown  
Daywalker Burill

Contributors: Aitijhya Kar, Alyssa Hillary, Caden Rocker, Emil Eichelberger, Gyps Curmi, Jo Smiley, Kai Yves Avery, Lis Regula, Maxfield Sparrow, Morgan West, Moss Billman, Sam Lacovara, Sav, Sé Sullivan, Shalen Lowell, Trystan Craigo

Cover Art Image by Daywalker Burill.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication in paperback or e-book form may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods without the prior written permission of the author. For more information, please contact: [publisher@boundlessendeavors.com](mailto:publisher@boundlessendeavors.com)

Rights to the individual works contained in this anthology are owned by the submitting authors and each has permitted the story's use in this collection.

Printed in the United States of America

Published by Boundless Endeavors, Inc.  
2292 North West 82nd Ave #3525  
Miami, FL 33198-1525  
U.S.A.  
[www.boundlessendeavors.com](http://www.boundlessendeavors.com)

First Printing, 2018

Library of Congress Control Number: 2018904880

ISBN-13: 978-0-9968309-6-6 (Print)  
ISBN-10: 0-9968309-6-0 (Print)  
ISBN-13: 978-0-9968309-7-3 (Ebook)  
ISBN-10: 0-9968309-7-9 (Ebook)

Includes bibliographical references.

Sam Lacovara  
Age - 23  
Non-Binary

## **19: Gender as Affect “Feeling” the Radical Potential for Queer Survival Beyond Binaries**

2016

“Gender is the poetry each of us makes out of the language we are taught.” - Leslie Feinberg, *Trans Liberation: Beyond Pink or Blue*

**F**or me, the journey to identify as neither a man nor a woman was as follows: compulsory heterosexuality and cisgenderism groomed me to be a cis, straight woman. As I entered adolescence, I began identifying as a cisgender queer woman, acknowledging that I was *definitely* not straight. I started to question gender in college and claimed a genderfluid identity, but still within the binary of man and woman, feeling like my identity moved between those two genders. After more exposure to the vastness of transgender identities, I claimed a non-

binary label, and then, in attempts to intentionally challenge the gender binary more directly, discovered and named what I call my “affective genders.”

Our understanding of normative binary genders has been constructed mainly through colonialism, specifically the raced, gendered, and classed expectations that colonialism has attached to performances of masculinity and femininity. In order to separate our understandings of gender from these oppressive, racist, and imperialist cultural implications, we must resist, and eventually transcend, binary gender by decolonizing our own genders. When I say decolonize our genders, I mean intentionally challenge the ideas and requirements that colonialism has placed upon our identities and performances of them.

Gendered experiences are informed by one’s race, class, ability, and other intersecting identities. An experience is never just what is happening at the given moment, it is directly related to everything that has come before it, personally and historically. While we may have all been taught to reproduce the colonialist gender binary, our relationships to and histories with it are very different, as are our modes of reproduction. This coming to consciousness of affective gender is reliant on one’s access to the resources necessary to unlearn compulsory heterosexuality and cisgenderism.

My ability to comprehend and re-negotiate my own identity was one of privilege and opportunity. I have been fortunate to have radical queer activist communities and academic spaces where theorizing gender was

accessible to, encouraged and required of me. Therefore, it is of the utmost importance that I recognize and acknowledge the privilege I have as a young, college-educated, trans-masculine white person. It is because of those specific intersections that I am able to do this theorizing, as I am given the space and resources to do it without constant threats of physical violence that are unavoidably present in the daily lives of gender-nonconforming folks of color. However, affective gender has the potential to affirm the experiences of those identities that exist and intersect in multiple, and perhaps conflicting, spheres. Affective gender is constructed completely by the self, and therefore is able to do whatever kind of work an individual needs it to, and can be expressed in the ways that are most comfortable to and safe for that person.

I argue that masculinity and femininity are expressions completely unrelated to gender identity, and separating these performances from our identities is the first step in decolonizing and destabilizing the binary. Realistically, all expressions of masculinity and femininity exist on a spectrum between the two poles, some just more distinctly (and intentionally) fluid than others. This could manifest in ways as simple as a cis woman wearing her hair short, or a cis man acting as the primary caretaker of children rather than breadwinner.

Audre Lorde, feminist scholar and poet, described the erotic as an untapped power within each of us, “between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings” (1984: 56). For me this

eroticism, one that is completely separate from the physical or the sexual, lives deep in my belly, and is awoken by specific sensory stimuli. I propose we construct gender as affect, based in our most personal experiences; we must acknowledge the things that make us *feel*. Affective gender doesn't require a specific set of pronouns, nor does it require that pronouns "match" a body or expression. Built from feelings, affective genders are limitless and inherently without rules.

The intense emotions we feel daily, and our relationship to their causes, are integral to our identities. A more comprehensive definition of affective gender would be one's emotional, mental, spiritual, physical, and/or otherwise psycho-, socio-, and physiological connections to oneself, one's environment, and others. Put simply, it is sense of internal and external presence and connection.

I've named my primary affective gender "banjender," after the eroticism that listening to the sound of a banjo makes me feel. It is a quick, folky, and plunky gender. It can be muffled, acoustic, tinny or steeley, bright or twangy. Even in its most intense forms, banjender is a relatively soft, mellow gender. I say "primary affective gender" because there are various experiences that awaken my erotic, and my affective gender identities are fluid and multiple so as to acknowledge and prioritize each of those emotional responses as they occur. Other affective genders of mine include the scent of fresh brewed coffee; the sight of the moon and constellations in a clear night's sky; and the combination of October leaves crunching under heavy boots, chilly winds gently

stinging flushed cheeks, and the warm, distant scent of fire. Each of these sensations causes an equally powerful and emotional experience for me that is much more foundationally linked to my personhood than my expressions of masculinity and femininity; therefore, I name my gender(s) after them.

Lorde calls attention to the phrase “it feels right to me” as the ultimate form of knowledge and guidance (1984: 56). Affective gender is the thing that feels right to you. It is a mode of naming and understanding that acknowledges one’s place in, and relationship to, a given moment. Affective gender is not to be conflated with the experience of *really* enjoying something. That said, I do not simply enjoy the sound of a banjo the way many others do, my emotional response to it is so intensely related to my sense of self that I *am* banjender.

Affective gender is the emotion one feels in response to a physical event; it is not something that *actually* happens in a way that can be tangibly experienced by anyone but the self. Even in a room full of people listening to the same music, no one but I can feel *my* specific eroticism that is associated with the music of a banjo. Because that feeling occurs within myself alone, it is my truth and no one else’s. This is the trickiness that comes with any truth claim: if it is not universally true, can it be considered true at all? Does authenticity come from mass validation, or the insistence (even if only by one person) that a truth exists? My truth claim that I *am* banjender enables me to find comfort in my non-binary identity, knowing that regardless of the pronouns someone misuses for me, or the binary gender expectations



projected onto me, my queer consciousness can survive within my affective gender.

In her discussion of affective solidarity, Clare Hemmings argued “that moment of affect... is the core of transformation” and that it is “an unstable entity and its impact cannot be controlled” (2012: 157). That moment of uncontrollable affect (for me, hearing the banjo and feeling erotic), followed by the conscious recognition of its happening, is the inception of the infinite possibility of affective gender. This coming to consciousness would allow all individuals to have their own affective genders, limitless in terms of quantity and content. However, this process is inextricably tied to one’s involvement in queer community and exposure to non-binary identities.

The language that we are given to define our gender identities and expressions, even as it becomes broader, still relies on binarist connotations. Words like transwoman and tomboy, while they express deviance from normative gender identity and expression, still rely on the roots of the gender binary (man/woman, boy/girl) for context. This additive model of reforming language clearly does not do enough to expand (nor ideally break) the boundaries of gender.

Instead of a designated list of specific words that are acceptable to use in describing one’s gender identity, I argue that any and *every* word should, and must, be available for naming one’s affective gender. Leslie Feinberg said, “we didn’t choose these words. They don’t fit all of us. It’s hard to fight an oppression without a name

connoting pride, a language that honors us" (1998: 206). That is exactly what I am arguing we change. Just as I can use the word banjo in my gender identity, any other word can be similarly co-opted and incorporated. The radical possibilities of affective gender are contingent on the ability to choose our own words, to make language honor our identities.

Whether you can identify an affective gender for yourself or not, the very concept is liberating for everyone. As Feinberg said, "trans liberation has meaning for you—no matter how you define or express your sex or gender" (1998: 5). The ability to access one's eroticism opens up endless possibilities for community-building, as the strongest communities are built not through shared identity, but shared experience. This is not unlike Hemmings' concept of affective solidarity, which, rather than grounding communities in shared identity, instead "is proposed as a way of focusing on modes of engagement that start from the affective dissonance that feminist politics necessarily begins from" (2012: 148). Her project seeks to move from affective dissonance, and modes of individual experience, to affective solidarity and collective work, which is precisely what I aim to do in moving from transgender and non-binary identity to affective gender.

Lorde stated that "in order to be utilized, our erotic feelings must be recognized. The need for sharing deep feeling is a human need" (1984: 58). In sharing my affective gender through this essay, I have vulnerably opened myself up to the possibility of mocking and cri-

tique, but also the possibility of power building and validation. The latter two are simultaneously self-serving and selfless; I can have my own identity affirmed while guiding others on how to experience their full erotic potential. That potential is, to quote Lorde, “an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire. For having experienced the fullness of this depth of feeling and recognizing its power, in honor and self-respect we can require no less of ourselves” (1984: 54). These experiences of significant affect are happening to all of us daily, whether we are conscious of them or not. To deprive them of their potential to serve our eroticism is a disservice to our queerness, our communities, our marginalized intersections, our futures, and our very senses of self.

There is an undeniable utopianism to affective gender identity, and it lends itself to critique of individualism, and questions of the logistics of community building. *How could these identities be considered legitimate? What would come of the binary gender categories? Where would social boundaries start and end?* However, I find this puzzling utopianism to be useful, important, and productive. As José Esteban Muñoz (1999), also a defender of the utopian, argued, “although utopianism has become the bad object of much contemporary political thinking, we nonetheless need to hold on to and even *risk* utopianism if we are going to engage in the labor of making a queerworld” (p. 25).

That’s what I’m asking you do. I’m asking you to risk all that you have been taught, all that you know about gender identity and expression. I’m asking you to

dig down, deep into your belly, and find what feels *right*, then name yourself after that feeling. I'm asking you to engage in this labor, and build a utopian, affective, erotic queerworld with me.

