"Being Genderqueer Before It Was a Thing"

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When I tell people that I have identified as genderqueer since the term first began circulating on the internet in the mid 1990s, I often add that, now in my 50s, I am the oldest assigned male at birth (AMAB) genderqueer person found in captivity. I say this jokingly, but it is not far from the truth. In my personal life and in my experience as a researcher on the lives of trans people, I have met few AMAB individuals who identify as genderqueer, and even fewer genderqueer individuals who are beyond their mid-20s. Genderqueer people who both were assigned male at birth and are over the age of 40 are as rare as an endangered species. In fact, I do not personally know anyone else like myself.

I certainly understand why relatively few male-assigned individuals claim a nonbinary identity. Acting or presenting in any way that deviates from the narrow parameters of what is considered appropriate "male" behavior can be dangerous, inviting physical assault or even murder. At the very least, the person faces the likelihood of harassment, discrimination, and ostracization from their peers, particularly from boys and men. Trans women who cannot or choose not to be stealth have a similar experience. The difference for nonbinary AMAB individuals is that many of us do not want to be seen by others as female (or as male), so we will always stand out and be potential targets. For many male-assigned individuals who do not feel themselves to be men, this cost seems too great, especially coming from a place of male privilege and, for some, also white privilege.

In addition, the lack of images of nonbinary trans people in the media and popular culture -- even today, in 2017 -- makes it difficult for people to know about, much less claim, a nonbinary identity. When I was growing up, I had no idea that there were options other than male and female, so I thought my inability to relate to other male-assigned individuals simply meant that I was a different kind of guy. Even when I learned about "trans" in college, it was only about individuals then referred to as "transsexuals," who were described as being "trapped in the wrong body." While I increasingly felt that I was not male, I did not identify as female either and did not reject my body to the extent of hating or feeling disconnected from it. The first trans people I met while working on the 1993 March on Washington for "Lesbian, Gay, and Bi Equal Rights and Liberation" only reinforced my sense that that was not me, as they were hyperfeminine trans women with big heels, big hair, and big breasts. While I strongly agreed with them politically on the importance of trans inclusion in the march's title (which was voted down, unfortunately), I felt that I had little in common with them personally.

My revelatory moment came through reading Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues* when it was published in 1993. The book's gender-nonconforming narrator is harassed and assaulted for not being readily identifiable as female or male, and they ultimately take testosterone to be stealth and survive physically and financially during the economic recession in Buffalo in the 1970s. Although I too had grown up in Buffalo, I was born about twenty years later than the narrator, in a working-class/lower middle-class suburb, and others rarely had difficulty determining my sex assignment. But I was able to relate to the narrator's discomfort with being neither female nor male, and the novel empowered me by enabling me to see that identifying outside of a gender binary was a possibility. However, I continued to feel alone, as even though *Stone Butch Blues* was based on Feinberg's experiences, the protagonist was a fictional character; I still did not personally know anyone else who identified as nonbinary.

Because of the lack of media representations of nonbinary trans individuals and the widespread ignorance about nonbinary people, even in LGBT communities, it was a gradual process for me to claim a nonbinary identity for myself and longer still to come out to others. In some respects, my experience is no different from the experiences of many nonbinary youth today. More than twenty years after I was figuring out my gender identity, there was still not much visibility for nonbinary trans individuals. When I give talks at colleges, I sometimes ask the audience members to name a person in popular culture who identifies their gender in nonbinary ways; invariably, they cannot think of anyone.

But while there continues to be a lack of well-known nonbinary trans people, there are many nonbinary individuals on social media, particularly Tumblr. As a result, young nonbinary individuals growing up in the late 2010s who are trying to understand their gender have online resources that did not exist in the 1990s and early 2000s. They can quickly find out the meaning of terms, read about other people's experiences and relate their own, and directly communicate with other nonbinary youth. These options were not available to me. While I did discover the term "genderqueer" online, that was the extent of information I could find in the mid 1990s. I did not have the opportunity to learn about or talk with others who shared my identity; I had to figure it out on my own, which meant that I made more than my share of missteps.

As a first step in coming out publicly as genderqueer, I decided to adopt a new, feminine first name – "Genny," after my grandmother Genevieve – because my given name, which was somewhat non-gendered when I was growing up, had become a decidedly male name. But because I wanted to be seen as nonbinary and not as a trans woman, I chose to combine “Genny” with my birth name. Over time, though, I found that this part “male”/part “female” name did not work. People would still call me by my birth name only, seeing “Genny” as optional, or would think “Genny” was my last name. I eventually decided to be just “Genny” and let the dissonance between a “female” name and a largely “male” appearance serve to indicate my nonbinary identity, along with adopting nonbinary pronouns for myself (at first, I went by “ze/hir” and now use “they/them”).

Determining how I wanted to present as nonbinary was also a gradual process. Since beginning college in the mid 1980s, I have had very long hair and have dressed fairly androgynously in shirts and jeans. When the word “genderqueer” was coined in the mid 1990s, and I began to use that term to describe myself, I initially thought that I would not do anything more to appear as nonbinary. But I became increasingly uncomfortable with having facial stubble, so began rounds of laser hair removal and electrolysis. I had no interest in having my body look traditionally female, so had no desire to take an estrogen-type drug. However, I did consider going on a testosterone blocker to prevent my body from continuing to virilize, which made the benefits of facial hair removal short-lived. But my endocrinologist was unsupportive, saying it would lead to osteoporosis. Not able to find anything online from people who were just taking a blocker, I did not pursue the idea further.

I ultimately decided that I did not have to look extremely androgynous in order to be myself and that I should not have to do so to be treated as how I identify. If others did not see and respect me as nonbinary, this was their problem, not mine. This is not to say that being misgendered does not feel invalidating and hurtful, but I try to recognize it as an indication of their ignorance about gender diversity and, in some cases, as a misguided attempt to be polite (such as customer service people referring to me as "sir").

Even before I began to identify as nonbinary, I was an activist for trans rights. In 1995, when I was a grad student at the University of Iowa, I worked with other activists to have "gender identity" added to the nondiscrimination ordinance of Iowa City in response to discrimination experienced by a trans person in a local business. After this success, I and a University of Iowa faculty member, Mickey Eliason, decided to advocate for "gender identity" to be included as well in the University's nondiscrimination statement. As a result, in 1996, the University of Iowa became the first college in the country to have a trans-inclusive nondiscrimination policy, and probably the first college to have *any* formal trans-inclusive policy.

At the time, I was completing a Ph.D. in African American Studies at Iowa, focusing my research on the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality. As a white person, I had gone into African American Studies as an undergraduate to begin to address my own ignorance about race and racism, and I continued in the field with the aim of teaching other white people, as I did not (and do not) believe it was the responsibility of people of color to educate whites about the ways that we engage in oppressive behavior. But after coming out as a nonbinary trans person, I decided that I could make more of a difference in the lives of trans students. I felt that if they knew someone like themselves older, they would hopefully have an easier time understanding and accepting their gender identity than I did. Only three years after earning my doctorate, I went back to being a student to earn a master's degree in Higher Education Administration from the University of Rochester so that I would be more capable of advocating for trans and other LGBTQIA+ students.

After graduating once again in 2001, I was hired to be the LGBT office coordinator at Ohio State University. At the time, trans students were beginning to come out there and at many other colleges across the country and asking for institutions to address their needs; however, they typically found that staff, faculty, and cis students were largely unknowledgeable and unsupportive. As a result, the fact that I was an out trans person was an asset to me on the job market—the opposite situation to what I often encountered, understandably, as a white person in African American Studies. When so many trans people face employment discrimination and are passed over for jobs because of their gender identity, it felt strange for my nonbinary gender identity to be seen as a positive, or at least not as a liability, in obtaining professional work.

I recognize that I have a tremendous amount of privilege to be in a position where I can be out as trans and, because everyone expects an LGBTQIA+ center director to be queer, not have to worry about workplace discrimination to the same degree as someone in another area of higher education. In the early 2000s, when I was one of the few trans academics who had the opportunity to be out, I used this privileged status to write individually and in collaboration with colleagues some of the first articles that addressed the experiences and needs of trans college students. I also joined the board of the Transgender Law and Policy Institute (TLPI) to be their college point person, which involved consulting with institutions on trans inclusion and tracking trans-inclusive campus policies (a role I assumed for Campus Pride in 2012, after TLPI became inactive). While there are thankfully relatively more out trans scholars today than fifteen years ago, colleges still largely ignore or marginalize trans students, especially nonbinary trans students, so I continue to focus my writing and public speaking, as well as much of my LGBTQIA+ student services work, on educating about and advocating for trans inclusion.

Even though I work in environments where I typically do not encounter outright discrimination as a nonbinary trans person, I regularly experience microaggressions in the form of misgendering. Soon after I began at Ohio State, I added “Genny” to my name and asked many of my colleagues, friends, and members of the local LGBTQ community to refer to me by “ze/hir.” But even after an adjustment period, I discovered that few people remembered my pronouns in the moment, and I quickly tired of continually correcting others and having to explain how to use and spell “ze” and “hir.”

Ironically, some of the most frequent misgendering I initially experienced—and the most painful—came from other trans people. The trans people I knew at the time were mostly trans women who were 10-20 years older than I. When they began to self-identify, being trans meant that you were either transsexual or a cross-dresser, so they had no lens with which to understand me as someone who felt more female than male, but who was not intending to present as female or medically transition. As a result, they looked at me as a cisgender ally and would refer to me as “he” and “him” in meetings. I found myself in a surreal situation where my gender identity was more often disrespected by other trans people than by some cis colleagues who had much less understanding of trans issues but wanted to be supportive of me. Eventually, many of these trans people did see me as one of them, after I legally changed my name and began electrolysis (there is nothing like shared pain as a bonding experience). But it was especially disappointing that the people whom I expected would be the most affirming were at first among the least.

In 2006, when I took my current position as the director of the LGBTQIA+ center at UMass Amherst, I decided to switch to using “they/them,” hoping that I would have less difficulty in getting people to remember and respect these pronouns because they would not have to learn a new vocabulary. I am misgendered less frequently now, whether for this reason, because I am in a relatively more progressive area of the country, or because people have become more educated about pronouns in recent years. I think it has also helped that I legally changed my name to "Genny" and that I regularly present on and advocate for trans students at my university and at campuses across the country, so that others are constantly reminded of my nonbinary identity. If I was not so visible as a trans policy wonk, I believe that I would be misgendered much more often.

Being seen as a nonbinary trans person is very important to me, as both a personal reflection of my identity and a political challenge to the dominant gender system. But I struggle at times with how to be recognizable and thus recognized as trans, when being transgender is often equated with being a binary trans person who has or is transitioning. Moreover, to the extent that nonbinary trans people are perceived by the larger society, it is because our gender "stands out"—i.e., because we are not readily able to be placed within a gender binary or our appearance sends "mixed gender signals." The result is that only individuals who present androgynously or whose gender expression clearly violates societal expectations get to be nonbinary. For me, this means that my gender identity is often invisible, especially as I age and look more male because of the long-term effects of testosterone. I am left wondering how to enact my gender in the absence of visible signs of gender nonconformity, as well as the absence of cultural images of older nonbinary people. Society may never "get" me in my lifetime, but I can only be myself.

As I stated at the outset of this essay, I do not personally know any other male-assigned nonbinary individuals who are over 25 years old. But nonbinary female-assigned individuals and binary trans people also remain scarce in higher education. At my institution, which has thousands of staff and faculty, I am one of the few out trans people who is not a student. I am regularly reminded of this fact at campus committee meetings, many of which begin with the attendees sharing their pronouns (at my request), along with their names and offices. Invariably, I am the only person who uses pronouns other than “he/him” and “she/her.” I greatly appreciate that the chairs of these committees ask pronouns, so that I can indicate mine and hopefully not be misgendered by other group members. But, at the same time, I am disheartened to always be the only one and to have to call attention to myself as *the* out nonbinary trans person.

I know that this situation will change in time, as the many nonbinary trans students on college campuses today graduate and take positions in higher education and elsewhere in the workforce. While I may not personally benefit from the growing number of out nonbinary students, I hope that they will benefit from me. Through my visibility and efforts to educate others, both at my college and at campuses nationwide, I hope that I am helping to create a more welcoming environment for the next generation of nonbinary trans people.