Introduction

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GENDER is a slippery illusion. Like the flat outline of a cube, you can perceive its shape as either concave or convex, extruding or withdrawn. If you're especially adept, you can see both simultaneously, or perhaps, even for a moment, neither at all. Upon deeper inspection, you might deduce the truth at the heart of it all: there is no one "correct" form. Yet all of them are real.

Most of us were raised to believe that gender is a dichotomy: male and female. But underneath this foundational "fact" lies a complexity we've been trying to untangle. The modern discourse on transgender people and on gender more broadly has already been elevated beyond duality. But, what *is* gender? Rather than having an answer for this basic question, we are left with even more questions. What is a man? What is a woman? And, central to the essays contained within this book, why does this matter?

Communities are blossoming around the experience of being something other than *man* or *woman*. While still new to many, the rise of nonbinary identities is another step built upon the work and accelerating progress of our LGBTQ predecessors. As gender diversity is increasingly embraced, more people and their allies are emerging and finding one another. They, in turn, extend the fight toward a deeper understanding and acceptance not only of the complexity of gender, but of the complexity of the individual.

This anthology faces the foundational questions of gender head-on. Through a personal examination of their own lives, thirty authors grant us a glimpse into the process of discovering, defining, constructing,

creating, and *experiencing* gender in a unique way. Today, the world is finally ready to hear their stories.

PART I: WHAT IS GENDER?

“Is it a boy or a girl?”

“It’s a dog.”

“But is it a boy dog or a girl dog?”

People are never shy to ask about a dog’s gender, and are quick to apologize when they get it wrong. Yet when it comes to the human species, directly inquiring about a person’s gender is often considered egregiously offensive. Regarded almost as insulting is the act of accidental misgendering, like calling someone *sir* when it should be *ma’am*. In this situation, a casual apology is not the norm; instead, the guilty party usually fumbles through a fix, thoroughly embarrassed by this transgression.

As far as we know, dogs do not have a gender identity—they don’t mind being called he or she, as long as there’s a treat involved. The question of “boy” dog or “girl” dog is merely an articulation of the most familiar and fundamental schema of gender: genitals. Humans, on the other hand, have a gender—an internal sense of who we are at our core that transcends body parts.

Across cultures and millennia, people have blurred the bounds of gender.¹ Although embodied in different words, meanings, and belief systems, their experience was as real then as it is today. In contemporary Western society, only in the last few decades has the realization that gender is not a simple male/female dichotomy come to the fore. But traditions die hard and cultural inertia runs deep. Before a child can form complete sentences, they learn that gender is a (if not *the*) primary characteristic that defines a human being. Personhood is contingent on the immediate categorization into a sex. Once the doctor takes a cursory look at a newly born infant’s genitals, officially proclaiming it to be male or female, the baby is marked for life.

Yet even this simple act of examining external reproductive organs leads to gray areas. While in most babies sex is as straightforward as penis or vagina, in as many as 1.7 percent of births this is not the case.² Medical literature possibly underestimates incidence rates, given that many people do not find out they are intersex or have a difference in

sexual development (DSD) until adulthood. This happens either because only nonvisible features such as their internal organs or chromosomes exhibit this divergence, or because their parents were pressured into silence due to continued stigmatization. If you argue that biological variations in sexual dimorphism are too rare to be of much importance, then consider that roughly one in a hundred people have bodies that differ from the “standard” male or female³—a rate that mirrors that of people with red hair.⁴ Surely you know someone with red hair.

Biological diversity is only the first crack in the precarious male/female binary. Historically, societies have afforded gender expression varying degrees of flexibility that shift across time. As an example from our own modern culture, up until the 1940s pink was considered a masculine color for its proximity to the more “vigorous” red.⁵ But due to a combination of gender normative panic and marketing, pink is now exclusively reserved for the feminine.⁶ Another strikingly recent gender crossover is the mundanity with which we regard women who wear pants. Clearly, the porous boundary around gender expression is not new. Rather, what has permeated our contemporary awareness is the acknowledgment that gender runs deeper than appearance, behavior, or preferences.

Gender is gradually being understood to be a holistic experience of ourselves, inside and out. Gender *identity* is regarded as separate from our *biology*—genitals, reproductive organs, chromosomes, hormones, secondary sex characteristics. It is also distinct from our gender *expression*—hair length, clothing, mannerisms, makeup.⁷ For most folks, their biology, expression, and identity are all in alignment. But for an estimated 1.4 million Americans, there is a mismatch.⁸ Framing gender identity as self-determined and independent from our body⁹ and external presentation has allowed increased recognition and acceptance of transgender people.

Despite this promising reconceptualization, our grasp of gender hinges upon the words we use to describe it. Language, unfortunately, remains steeped in binary constructions. Try describing your gender without using the terms male/female, masculine/feminine, girl/boy, woman/man, or any variation thereof—you are likely to come up blank. Similarly, it’s nearly impossible to talk about someone else without assigning a gender to them. In many cases you cannot escape gendering even yourself. For instance, in romance languages like Spanish or

French, nouns and adjectives indicate gender, which can often be your own. In English, the paltry offering of two gendered pronouns poses limitations to properly address nonbinary people. Just as we don't say "she" when referring to a man, using either "he" or "she" is incorrect when referring to someone who is not male or female.

One way of working around these constraints is by repurposing existing solutions. Because our language has been using "singular they" for centuries, this has become the most common pronoun for referring to anyone whose gender is not known, not specified, or not in the male/female binary. As of 2017, the official stylebook for the *Associated Press* now recommends using the "singular they/them" for nonbinary individuals.¹⁰ The trans community has further spurred the proliferation of new pronouns: s/he, zie/hir, xe/xem, ey/em—the list is innumerable, with comprehensive guides,¹¹ apps,¹² and games¹³ to help illustrate their usage. Best practices include specifying pronouns in email signatures and business cards, mentioning a person's pronoun alongside their name when introducing them, and *always* asking for someone's pronoun.

Words shape our world, and finding the right ones—or inventing new ones—gives us the power to expand what we already know. More importantly, words grant us the ability to communicate with others. At the same time, words can box us in, labeling everyone and everything, inevitably homogenizing differences. As liberating as it can be to find a word that describes your gender, it can also be limiting. Labels place boundaries on what we are as well as what we are not.

"Nonbinary" simply means *not* binary; when applied to gender, it means not exclusively male or female. Nonbinary is defined by what it's not. Even the word "genderqueer,"¹⁴ derived from a reclaiming of the word "queer," encompasses any form of gender that is *not* normative.¹⁵ The problem of terminology goes beyond one of social cohesion and agreement: it is philosophical. How can a group of people whose genders are largely illegible to the world translate their existence to the men and women around them? Often, the language of the nonbinary community reflects the frustrating but necessary process of defining oneself only in opposition to what is already defined. Demiboy, transfeminine, androgynous, bigender, even the word "nonbinary" itself—all of these incorporate the existing binary to one extent or another.

Gender nonconforming, gender variant, gender diverse, gender expansive, gender creative—many of the terms are quite new, and as

such haven't settled firmly into the lexicon. What all of them fail to capture is the nuanced humanity of those whose gender ventures into the unknown. Nonbinary individuals are more than simply both, neither, or in between. Stepping beyond male and female leads us into the infinite universe of gender.

In this book, nonbinary people finally get a chance to define themselves by who they *are*, rather than by the negative space of what is missing. The narratives in the first part highlight how those whose gender cannot be described as simply male or female are creating a positive space for their existence.

PART II: VISIBILITY

Standing Up and Standing Out

Shared identities serve as an imperfect proxy to quickly ascertain and understand another's experience. In addition to gender, we are born into, create, adopt, and self-proclaim ourselves into further categories based on race, religion, nationality, sexuality, profession, socioeconomic status, disability; we are trauma survivors, cancer patients, Californians, parents, veterans, vegetarians, artists, athletes, and more. Not only is gender highly unique and individualized, so is the intersection of all our other identities.

We all carry visible and invisible identities. Like gender, some of our identities are immediately evident to strangers, while others are misinterpreted, misconstrued, or hidden. Some identities elicit pride; others shame. Most of them are accompanied by an inherited or chosen community of others with similar stories, uniting us through common characteristics or experiences.¹⁶ The solidarity that arises affords support, but also demarcates *us* from *them*. When it's unclear whether someone is an "us" or a "them," outsiders tend to react unpredictably—with confusion, curiosity, desire, ridicule, anger, or even violence.

Being openly transgender still invites danger. Trans people are seven times more likely than the cisgender population to experience physical violence from law enforcement. Trans women are almost twice as likely to experience sexual violence compared to other survivors. Perhaps most worrisome, two-thirds of the victims of hate-motivated homicides are trans women of color.¹⁷ Aside from hate crimes and harassment, trans

people face alarmingly high rates of poverty, unemployment, homelessness, and HIV, with scarce legal protections.¹⁸ Consequently many trans people, especially those who “pass” or are consistently perceived as cisgender men or women, avoid disclosing that they are transgender in the majority of their social and professional spheres.¹⁹ Opting out of being out was the norm in the past; transition was accompanied by the presumption that one would go “stealth” and never reveal a transsexual history for fear of being ostracized, fired, arrested, or worse.²⁰

Our understanding of disclosure has since evolved to encompass—like everything else—a spectrum. Reasons for disclosing are as varied as people; some feel safe sharing their trans identity to a select few, others unabashedly announce it to the world. Even *what* someone discloses and *how* vary by individual and circumstance. But choice in disclosure assumes not only safety; it is also contingent on the ability to be consistently perceived as one of the two readily available genders. So what does “passing” mean for nonbinary people? In the *2015 U.S. Transgender Survey*, only 3 percent of nonbinary respondents “always told others” that they were nonbinary.²¹ When it is impossible for your external appearance to accurately reflect your inner gender—when the general public is missing the mental model that represents your gender—you will never be truly seen.

Visibility of transgender people has gained significant traction in the last decade. In 2014, *Time* magazine declared a “transgender tipping point” when Laverne Cox graced the cover. Celebrities like Jazz Jennings, Janet Mock, Chaz Bono, and Caitlyn Jenner have taken over reality TV, along with portrayals of trans characters in numerous movies, books, TV programs, and other media.²² However, the overwhelming majority of these depictions reinforce the prototypical transgender narrative, centered on milestones related to transition from one binary gender to the other. While this template can serve as a helpful guide, it can severely limit the possibilities for anyone whose gender path does not align with it. Nonbinary experiences remain invisible to this momentum.

Mainstream portrayals of nonbinary people are scarce. In a ten-year content analysis of thirteen of the most widely circulated U.S. newspapers, only 1.2 percent of paragraphs that mentioned a transgender person were about a nonbinary individual.²³ Only a handful of global or national public figures have alluded (even tangentially) to identifying with gender in a nontraditional way.²⁴ In becoming one of the few

nonbinary role models with far-reaching platforms, they are burdened with the unrealistic expectation of speaking for the entire genderqueer umbrella. Even when stories of nonbinary people are published, popular media tends to erase the broad range of diversity in gender communities. Left behind in the shadows are those who are nonwhite, assigned male, middle-aged or older, femme, disabled, medically transitioned, parents, religious, live in a rural area, or are part of countless other overlooked groups.

How can people understand what they don't even know exists? When a nonbinary person opens up their life to one or hundreds or millions, they contribute to rebuilding our shared mental model of gender. By speaking out and sharing their stories, each author in part 2 cultivates a new branch of gender, encouraging it to sprout and grow freely within the minds of outsiders and the spirits of their own.

PART III: COMMUNITY

Creating a Place for the Rest of Us

We are presently witnessing an exponential rise in scientific, legal, political, educational, theoretical, and lexical advances that support the needs of gender-diverse people.²⁵ As transgender topics take center stage in media and in politics, so do public arguments over their rights.²⁶ Dinner table debates over bathroom bills²⁷ parallel the waning furor over gay marriage in the United States. Through that milestone, gay and queer people gained more than the right to a legal union; society's understanding of sexuality shifted from merely being about sexual acts to encompassing the complex amalgamation of romantic love, companionship, and familial structure.

Similarly, gender discourse is gradually moving from penises and vaginas and their corresponding surgeries to a conceptualization of identity that reckons with transgender people as full participants in life and society. Although widely celebrated, the consequent integration into preexisting social structures has nevertheless entailed conflict within the trans and queer population. Assimilation into the mainstream forces some to reconcile with the loss of the radicalness that once accompanied queerness by default. Meanwhile, those who do not

fit the paragon of white upper-middle class respectability continue to struggle for their survival.²⁸

To mitigate this ongoing marginalization of nondominant groups, the LGBTQIA+ community splinters off into countless identity-based factions. As an individual's identity shifts, so does their membership within these subgroups. This blurriness extends to the discussion itself. Within gender diverse communities, there is overlap and disagreement as to what the words we use actually mean, and who can share a given identity. For instance, do nonbinary people belong in the transgender community? Some people say yes, some no. We walk a tightrope between acknowledging these lines and finding utility within them, while claiming that such boundaries are artificial. But central to this discussion is the lived experience of the person in question.

While the dichotomy of male and female may be false, it still creates a very real bifurcation. The world remains largely divided in two—pink or blue, he or she, testosterone or estrogen, M or F—with no room for other. Nonbinary people are left out of language, paperwork, clothing stores, and bathrooms; even tea and vitamins are laden with gendered marketing. In domains segregated by gender this vulnerability is especially salient. Because they don't fully belong on any side, nonbinary people are excluded from participating in activities that define everyday life.

The Internet is sometimes the only safe platform where stigmatized or invisible groups are able to express themselves. Today, it is often the first place people go to with questions about gender. Connecting with one another can foster a sense of meaning, belonging, and fulfillment, as well as help build the resilience needed to live as an outsider. The trans community has built a thriving presence online. For genderqueer folks especially, digital life offers a plethora of identities and stories to explore.²⁹ Bloggers and vloggers proudly share their journey with millions of followers. On the other side of the screen is someone learning a new vocabulary, discovering possibilities, and, perhaps for the first time, seeing themselves in another person. Social media has paved the way for a self-serve model of informational resources, medical knowledge, support networks, political activism, diverse representation, and, above all, building community around themselves and their loved ones.³⁰

From family, hobbies, culture, spirituality, and other shared life experiences, the authors in part 3 transition in and out of various communities throughout their lifetime. Some find, express, or announce their

gender online, giving and receiving virtual validation. Like every one of us, they grapple with belonging—to multiple spaces, to no spaces, to all spaces.

PART IV: TRANS ENOUGH

Representation and Differentiation

Nonbinary people comprise over one-third of the U.S. trans population³¹ (with the percentage steadily increasing with every large-scale survey),³² yet their social and health care needs have notoriously received limited attention. Medical literature and scientific research, scant as it is for evidence-based transgender health,³³ is nearly nonexistent when it comes to serving the distinctive needs of the nonbinary population.³⁴ Even recent directives issued by federal medical bodies embracing trans health care do not stray from the rigid, stepwise binary model of transition.³⁵

Within the largest international organization of medical professionals dedicated to transgender health, nonbinary people have been historically glossed over. The World Professional Association of Transgender Health, or WPATH, issues the Standards of Care (SOC); these are the guidelines that all providers follow to care for trans people. Only in 2012 did the updated seventh version of the Standards of Care explicitly refer to nonbinary identities. Gender is endorsed as a spectrum primarily by emphasizing individualized treatment, and by replacing the now archaic “opposite” gender with the newly introduced language of “target” gender. Even more recent articles reassessing the current SOC criteria conclude by conceding: “Perhaps the concept of gender queerness could be addressed more thoroughly in a separate paragraph.”³⁶

As a result of this lack of specificity, myths and misconceptions are rife among health providers. Nearly one-quarter of transgender adults, and up to half of trans young adults,³⁷ delay health care because of fear of mistreatment or discrimination.³⁸ Therapists and doctors, even those experienced in treating trans men and women, can be hesitant to care for nonbinary patients.³⁹ In addition to financial and structural barriers, trans people are themselves often unaware of all the options available, deterring many from self-advocacy.

Thankfully, other providers have been willing to bend the written and unwritten rules. Counselors help nonbinary people navigate coming out at work with they/them pronouns; primary care physicians prescribe low doses of hormones; doctors perform individualized surgeries using the Informed Consent model. More promising still, the as-of-yet unpublished eighth version of the WPATH Standards of Care will devote an entire chapter to nonbinary and gender-nonconforming people, as well as another robust section addressing the needs of transgender and gender-diverse children.

It seems, these days, that youth have taken center stage of our expanding notions of gender. According to GLAAD's *Accelerating Acceptance 2017* survey, one-fifth of American young adults (ages eighteen to thirty-four) identify as LGBTQ, and they are more than two times more likely to identify as LGBTQ than those over fifty. Furthermore, 12 percent do not identify with the gender they were assigned at birth, and even non-LGBTQ youth are increasingly using terminology that falls outside the male/female binary.⁴⁰ Schools across the United States are embracing gender-neutral bathrooms and LGBTQ clubs; many universities now include a field for preferred name and preferred pronoun in their application. Admittedly, groundbreaking social movements often spark from the newest generation loudly questioning the way things are. But as empowering as it sounds to lionize our young pioneers, the illusion that being genderqueer is restricted to urban white adolescents and young adults has given way to negative stereotypes that impact all nonbinary people of all ages and walks of life.⁴¹

Blanket dismissals of nonbinary genders are all too common. Nonbinary gender is deemed a playful fantasy, just another way for teens to get attention—as if it's suddenly cool to transgress gender. Moreover, adolescents are assumed to succumb to peer pressure, so it follows that genderqueer kids are seen as simply molding themselves after their friends. This belief is so common that there is a pejorative label for it: *transtrender*.⁴² At best, they are accused of being “snowflakes” who are demanding undeserved special treatment such as obscure pronouns; at worst, they can suffer discrimination and violence at rates disproportionately higher than their cisgender or transgender peers.⁴³

Even when nonbinary gender is considered valid, adults wonder, is it just a phase?⁴⁴ After all, it's normal for teenagers to be confused, to

try on different labels and personas as they come of age. And as our tolerance for self-expression has expanded, gender and sexuality have become fair game for experimentation. Not to mention that every journalist feels compelled to include the oft-touted but thoroughly debunked statistic that 80 percent of children who exhibit gender variance will change their mind once they hit puberty.⁴⁵ When disregarded, nonbinary identity is seen as a passing fad. If taken seriously, nonbinary identity is viewed as a stepping-stone toward an inevitable binary transition, an assumption that can be amplified when someone takes medical steps toward gender alignment. Many well-intentioned parents and providers are simply waiting for kids to “make up their mind” or “pick a side”; they would rather their child move on with a transition that fits within established guidelines and social structures, or settle for none at all, than remain in perpetual limbo.⁴⁶ As for nonbinary adults . . . perhaps one day they will grow out of it.

Nonbinary individuals are commonly miscategorized in another way: as queer people expressing an “extreme” form of gayness, an argument that echoes back to the beginnings of the transgender movement. Aside from conflating sexual orientation, gender expression, and identity, this distorted understanding also brings to light the differential degrees of freedom for gender transgression based on birth-assigned gender. People assigned female have a wider latitude to express masculine behavior, whereas those assigned male tend to be punished for displaying any signs of femininity, even in our modern era. The words alone, “tomboy” and “sissy,” respectively connote tame versus derogatory variations for gender nonconformity.⁴⁷ Given society’s underlying misogyny, expressions of femininity are harshly limited, thus precluding many—especially those on the transfeminine or femme spectrum—from an authentic gender expression. As a consequence, only a narrow range of representations (often confined to transmasculine androgyny) have come to erroneously embody a genderqueer standard.

Taken together, these stereotypes lead to the harmful conclusion that nonbinary people do not deserve care. Dr. Johanna Olson-Kennedy, who has treated thousands of trans youth as a pediatrician at Children’s Hospital Los Angeles, neatly counters these fallacies:⁴⁸

What is true is that unpacking the gender binary is becoming increasingly popular, because I think youth recognize that it is not

adequate for deeper human existence. Gender roles are largely archaic in many regards. So are youth experimenting with gender bending? Yes, absolutely. But they are not in distress. They are bending in solidarity with a movement to dismantle an obsolete set of gender rules, and stand in solidarity with their trans friends and the community. There are distinct differences in these youth. They are not likely to stick a needle in their body every week to be trendy. There is no reward for being trans. I can't get adolescents to finish ten days of antibiotics. It is so critical to differentiate between distress and social change.

As society's framework for gender shifts, so too do the behaviors and experiences of our youth. Undoing the biases against nonbinary people requires embracing new interpretations and expressions.

But the onus of untangling these tropes is not confined to the cis-gender population. As trans men and women are being more openly embraced, there are a handful within the trans community who feel threatened by the emergence of nonbinary identities.⁴⁹ This increasingly small subset perceives genderqueer folk as facetiously toying with gender, sully the societal attitudes toward *all* trans people, and consequently risking the incredible progress that has been made in recent years. Worries abound about continued access to hormones and surgeries, longer waitlists to get into gender clinics, and, of course, fighting for the baseline respect that all human beings deserve. These concerns are manifested in an utterly misguided vitriol that proves damaging to the entire gender community. The solution lies not in suppressing nonbinary identities, but rather in improving the system to provide adequate primary care and transition services to *everyone*.

Unfortunately, these widespread beliefs can lead anyone who questions their gender to start wondering, *Am I trans enough?* As they parse out their identity in relation to their self and society, they run into contradictory expectations and assumptions about what a transgender experience is supposed to look like.⁵⁰ Am I transitioning too little? Am I transitioning too much? Do I look too masculine? Am I perceived as a woman too often? Is it OK that I don't hate my body parts? Am I still nonbinary if I want to be called *he* and not *they*? Do I really feel gender dysphoria? What should gender dysphoria even feel like? How do I know whether I'm *really* trans?

Compounding these doubts and uncertainty are toxic narratives reinforced within the trans community itself.⁵¹ These have been shaped by a complex interplay of cultural norms in addition to the constraints trans people face to access health and legal services.⁵² Adversely impacting the community as a whole, these hierarchies are used to police who can rightly claim an “authentic” trans identity. One mark of legitimacy is physical dysphoria—the somatic misalignment between gender and body. Another sign of this supposed authentic transness is deep certainty in one’s gender from a young age. Comparative taxonomies only serve to silence any trans person whose story doesn’t quite align, which subsumes nearly everyone whose gender is not in the binary. Swept even further behind the curtain are trans people who come out later in life, who birth children, who retransition, or who otherwise follow a different journey.

Nonbinary people wrestle with many of the typical questions that many trans people face, such as coming out, changing their name and pronouns, opting for hormones or surgery. But the answers come in a murkier package, as there is still no paradigm for how nonbinary gender can coexist within the established male/female dichotomy. Nonbinary people reconcile with an inner gender that cannot be properly expressed and understood by the outside world; very often, their true identity can never be fully actualized. At best, transition for a nonbinary person involves a compromise: All options are inadequate, so which one will be better than nothing? Which path will be good enough?

Nonbinary people run themselves through an excruciating mental gauntlet, from pronouns to labels to physical changes. They debate not only whether medical transition is right for them, but whether their dysphoria is *enough* to warrant hormones at all, or whether they are trans *enough* to consider (let alone deserve access to) surgery. Both those who do and do not physically transition are then paradoxically challenged to demonstrate that they are *nonbinary* enough;⁵³ a binary appearance belies their internal gender, opening them to bias from their own community of trans siblings.

Society’s reliance on science, biology, and medicine as ultimate truth⁵⁴ demotes a person’s internal felt and lived experiences as illegitimate sources of self-knowledge. In an effort to “prove” their nonbinary gender really does exist, they question the very realness of it. Gender is not something we can touch. It’s hard to describe—intangible,

unknowable. It is also inextricably embedded in our lives. Trans people often talk of how, regardless of their current gender, their history is ingrained in who they are today. In other domains, such as religion, language, or national origin, childhood socialization is similarly given up, undone, or replaced in adulthood, whether by choice or by the involuntary outcome of circumstance. Humans also carry habits, ideologies, traumas, emotions, conditions, all of which reside to a large extent in the mind. They are difficult to unlearn, get rid of, heal, affirm. Harder still is proving they exist. Are you *actually* depressed? Are you *truly* in love? Are you *really* trans? How do you know?

Understanding the real truth lies in the individual stories of people. Representing a range of generations, genders, and journeys, every author in part 4 wrestles with the question of trans enough. Following their own path, each one found a way to reimagine their future and make themselves whole.

PART V: REDEFINING DUALITIES

Paradoxes and Possibilities of Gender

Our world is constructed on binaries that mask complexity, much like that two-dimensional rendering of the three-dimensional cube. Thin black lines against a vast white page can never wholly represent their object of imitation. At the same time, the simplicity of the outline does not detract from the intricacy of the cube. Capturing only height and width, those six lines, drawn at particular angles in particular positions, are an attempt at conveying something beyond the page: the third dimension of depth.

Our cultural consciousness is filled with binaries where an additional dimension has entered the foreground: male/female, gay/straight, black/white, cisgender/transgender, binary/nonbinary. In some cases, the process of our collective awakening feels all but complete; in others, it feels like a slogging haul of tiny steps forward and back. As an example, Americans are still forced to self-identify into one of five racial categories on nearly every form or application.⁵⁵ At the same time, the discourse around race and ethnicity has evolved to incorporate the socially constructed nature of these categories. Similarly, some people

display disabled-parking placards in their car while others do not, even though the physical, mental, and emotional abilities of each body shift from year to year and moment to moment. In reconceptualizing these binaries, we deconstruct and reconstruct their definitions, their social implications, their communities, their histories, and their role in our sense of self.

Male and female are one of humanity's foundational underpinnings. Yet the creation of a new dichotomy—binary and nonbinary—ultimately proves just as limiting as the dichotomy of man and woman. At the same time, nonbinary gender is a unique concept and lived experience—separate from cisgender, and different from the mainstream understanding of transgender as a binary identity. The existence of nonbinary people shows us that gender is messy. In embracing this messiness, perhaps we can simultaneously acknowledge that the joys and struggles of nonbinary people are not the same as, yet not in opposition to, cisgender and binary transgender lives.

The narratives in part 5 illustrate the paradoxical possibilities of gender. Each author offers us a glimpse of what it would be like if our minds and bodies were met with simple curiosity, if we allowed ourselves to experience one another as the expansive, messy, uncategorizable individually unique human beings that we are.

Gender is everywhere—it permeates everything we do, everyone we meet, every place we visit, every interaction we have. The benefits of expanding gender out of its neatly circumscribed discrete categories are not limited to intersex, transgender, nonbinary, or otherwise gender-diverse people.⁵⁶ Detachment from gender norms affords a man the license to reclaim pink, or ask for the soft touch of his friend when he's feeling hurt; it boosts a woman's efforts to break the glass ceiling and close the gender pay gap, or wear what she chooses without turning into the object of scorn. Freedom to explore gender means girls and boys can grow up in a world that no longer reprimands them for acting one way and not the other, a world that doesn't ridicule them for their preferences, a world that doesn't limit their authenticity. Gender constricts us. Gender can also liberate us.

It is impossible for the two boxes of "male" and "female" to capture gender's vast nuances, yet social interaction and communication

necessitate constructing representations of gender, however imperfect. Perhaps we can break out of the illusion: instead of being either/or, these binaries are both/and. Accepting the paradoxical duality means it is no longer a battle between the binary and the spectrum—they coexist in the same space. Gender houses the infinite possibilities in between, adjacent to, and outside of the realm that it currently represents. Gender is static, and gender is fluid. Gender is at the core of who we are, and gender is also just one of our many identities.

NOTES

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7. For an excellent graphic explaining this, see Landyn Pan and Anna Moore, “The Gender Unicorn,” *Trans Student Educational Resources*, www.transstudent.org/gender.

8. Andrew R. Flores, Jody L. Herman, Gary J. Gates, and Taylor N. T. Brown, *How Many Adults Identify as Transgender in the United States?* (Los Angeles: Williams Institute, 2016).

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NONBINARY