"The Whole Point is That We're Not Supposed to Look Like Anything": Non-binary (Un)Intelligibility and Carving Out Space in Gender's Border-Zones

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"THE WHOLE POINT IS THAT WE'RE NOT SUPPOSED TO LOOK LIKE ANYTHING": NON-BINARY (UN)INTELLIGIBILITY AND CARVING OUT SPACE IN GENDER'S BORDER-ZONES

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ABSTRACT

Non-binary people exist in a world in which the conditions for their existence are foreclosed by the dominant cultural frames, a world in which the human can only be understood through membership of one of the two binary gender categories of male and female. This article explores the ways that non-binary participants articulated their experiences of non-binary gender identification through Butler's concept of (un)intelligibility and Hale's idea of gender's border-zones. The participants exist within the discursive frame in which adhering to the binary gender system is a necessary condition for a liveable life. This article explores how those non-binary people who live within gender's border-zones are forced to develop new discursive tools to carve out space for their inclusion within the realm of the intelligible. Drawing on interviews conducted with self-identified non-binary participants, this article explores the way that participants negotiated their non-binary gender, by exploring the ways they are both included and excluded from discursive spaces due to their non-binary gender. This article explores the way that gender unintelligibility opens up space for the multiplicities, contradictions, and ambiguities of non-binary experience, as well as how this same unintelligibility renders non-binary people vulnerable to violence. The violence articulated by the participants was specifically to do with their experiences of erasure—being included into the existing binary gender categories that do not adequately describe their experience—and physical or verbal abuse due to their exclusion from the binary gender system. This article argues that non-binary can be understood as a distinct gender category that has permeable borders, and that inclusion in this category through self-identification has material consequences for non-binary people.

KEYWORDS: non-binary, intelligibility, border-zones, gender, queer, violence

> Who can I become in such a world where the meanings and limits of the subject are set out in advance for me? By what norms am I constrained as I begin to ask what I may become? And what happens when I begin to become that for which there is no place within the given regime of truth?
> —Judith Butler[1]

In recent years, non-binary has emerged as a gender category within mainstream society. The term 'non-binary' has been used in both the academy and popular culture to denote genders that are excluded from the hegemonic gender binary of male and female. In this paper I argue that non-binary can be understood as a queer gender category that is *not* akin the categories of male and female, which are (inaccurately) defined as discrete, bounded categories. Rather, non-binary is a distinct gender category that has permeable borders, and that inclusion into this category through self-identification has material consequences for non-binary people. I draw on data collected from in-depth interviews conducted with non-binary participants to explore their lived experience as non-binary and discuss how non-binary functions as a gender category.

In order to fully understand the context in which non-binary has emerged as a gender category, it is first necessary to understand the bigenderism at the heart of Western society.[2] Bigenderism refers to a societal structure in which 'there are only two genders, which correspond with the two sexes, male and female'[3] and that 'everyone must be one [gender] or the other'.[4] In a bigendered social order, all interactions are framed through gender, which means that all subjects must be successfully included into one of the two gender categories in order to function socially[5]— this means that 'the one thing that is absolutely not allowed is a gender that does not fall neatly into one of the two categories'.[6] Therefore, subjects whose genders are not either female or male, such as non-binary people, are excluded from this gender order. Those who do not conform to the binary gender order of society are erased or violently punished for this transgression of gender norms. This phenomenon can be understood through to Butler's theory of intelligibility.

According to Butler, intelligibility is a necessary condition for a liveable life. In a bigenderist society, gender serves as a 'condition of cultural intelligibility'.[7] Those who do not conform to these conditions of intelligibility, such as people whose genders do not align with the

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[1] Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 58.
[2] I acknowledge that 'Western' is a contested term that can refer to a variety of cultural experiences. In this paper, I use 'Western' and 'the West' to refer to *majority white* cultures that are derived from European culture.
[3] Miqqi Alicia Gilbert, 'Defeating Bigenderism: Changing Gender Assumptions in the Twenty-First Century', *Hypatia*, 2009, 93–112 (p. 93).
[4] Gilbert, p. 95.
[5] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London and New York: Verso, 2004); Butler, *Undoing Gender*.
[6] Gilbert, p. 95.
[7] Butler, *Undoing Gender*, p. 52.

male-female binary, are therefore excluded from the realm of the human.[8] As subjects are constituted socially, it is discourse at this social level that constructs the boundaries for thinking the human [9]. However, the social and cultural natures of these frames for thinking the human means that they are open to change—the boundaries of the human can be opened up to include those who have been hitherto excluded. Non-binary people, then, exist in a border zone where their gender is unintelligible within mainstream discourse.

Although non-binary is a category that has come into being in recent years, it has developed out of, and alongside, existing, historical categories. Functioning as a permeable category at 'the margins of multiple overlapping identity categories',[10] non-binary does similar conceptual work to categories such as (stone) butch, camp, androgynous, (bull) dyke, gender deviant, tomboy, genderqueer, gender non-conforming, pangender, genderfluid, agender, and many other terms that have been, and continue to be used to describe non-normative gendered subjectivities.[11] In academic literature, non-binary has been defined in many different ways. It has been used as 'an umbrella term to include people whose gender identities do not neatly fall into the dominant gender categories of 'man/boy' and 'woman/girl''.[12] Others have used it as a term that 'defies the assumed normativity, naturalness, and expectations of ontological gender',[13] and as a 'catchall term for gender identities other than man and woman'.[14] It has further been defined as an umbrella term for those people who 'have a gender which is neither male nor female and may identify both as male and female at one time, as different genders at different times, as no

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[8] Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*.

[9] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*.

[10] C. Jacob Hale, 'Consuming the Living, Dis(Re)Membering the Dead in the Butch/Ftm Borderlands', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 4.2 (1998), 311–40 (p. 336).

[11] Some examples of this are: Jody L. Herman, Jack Harrison, and Jaime Grant, 'A Gender Not Listed Here : Genderqueers , Gender Rebels , and OtherWise in The', *LGBTQ Policy Journal at the Harvard Kennedy School*, 2 (2012), 13–24; Judith Halberstam, 'Transgender Butch: Butch/FTM Boder Wars and the Masculine Continuum', *GLQ*, 4 (1998), 287-310; Genny Beemyn, 'Coloring Outside the Lines of Gender and Sexuality: The Struggle of Nonbinary Students to Be Recognized', *The Educational Forum*, 79.4 (2015), 359–61; Anna I Corwin, 'Language and Gender Variance: Constructing Gender beyond the Male/Female Binary', *Electronic Journal of Human Sexuality*, 12 (2009), 1–12; Hélène Frohard-Dourlent and others, '"I Would Have Preferred More Options": Accounting for Non-Binary Youth in Health Research', *Nursing Inquiry*, 24 (2016), 1–9; Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998); Stephanie L. Budge, H. Kinton Rossman, and Kimberly A. S. Howard, 'Coping and Psychological Distress Among Genderqueer Individuals: The Moderating Effect of Social Support', *Journal of LGBT Issues in Counseling*, 8.1 (2014), 95–117; Brian Jacobsen and Brooke Donatone, 'Homoflexibles, Omnisexuals, and Genderqueers: Group Work with Queer Youth in Cyberspace and Face-to-Face', *Group*, 33.3 (2009), 223–34; Emily Lenning, 'Moving Beyond the Binary: Exploring the Dimensions of Gender Presentation and Orientation.', *International Journal of Social Inquiry*, 2.2 (2009), 39–54; Christina Richards and others, 'Non-Binary or Genderqueer Genders', *International Review of Psychiatry*, 28.1 (2016), 95–102; Dafina-Lazarus Stewart, 'Trans*versing the DMZ: A Non-Binary Autoethnographic Exploration of Gender and Masculinity', *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 30.3 (2017), 285–304.

[12] Frohard-Dourlent and others, p. 2.

[13] Stewart, p. 290.

[14] Corwin, p. 2.

gender at all, or dispute the idea that there are only two genders'.[15] In this article, my use of the term non-binary aligns with these definitions. However, I do not use non-binary as an umbrella term, but as a permeable category. I do this in order to allow a level of self-definition for people, so that those who do not identify with non-binary as a term, but otherwise fit into the definition, are not forcibly included in the category.

In this paper, I seek to show how non-binary participants negotiate a world that has been set up for their non-existence. Non-binary as a gender category works to challenge the rigid boundaries of the binary categories, to trouble the regulatory nature of the binary gender system, and to include those who were hitherto excluded from the realm of the human.

'Are You an Alien?': A Personal Reflection on Non-Binary

It is helpful here to first reflect on my own attachment to non-binary. My non-binary experience hinges around being seen and understood for who I feel myself to be. An example of this was when I attempted to explain my gender to my two nieces, aged eight and ten: 'It's like, I'm not a boy or a girl. I'm something else'. They looked at me and laughed, 'How can you not be a boy or a girl? You're an it?', and 'Are you an alien?'. I had a similar experience when I tried to explain non-binary to my mother, and she responded: 'So if you're not a boy, and you're not a girl […] then you're nothing?'. These experiences of erasure, of feeling alien, have driven my desire to investigate the procedures and consequences of exclusion and unintelligibility for non-binary people.

Further, these experiences directly contrast with my experiences within the queer community, where I feel visible, understood, and included. I use 'they' pronouns, and most people in the queer community use these pronouns when they refer to me. When someone refers to me as 'she', which happens fairly regularly outside of the queer community, I feel a separation between myself and this 'she' person. There is a pronounced discomfort whenever I hear that syllable. Conversely, when someone uses 'they' pronouns, I feel that they are seeing me for who I am, without the disconnect of assumptions and failure that comes with the pronouns 'he' or 'she'. In a way, it feels like Jay Prosser's 'Going Home'.[16] Prosser characterises trans experience as existing in a body that is wrong. By going through medical interventions to change one's body so that one passes as the opposite binary gender, one experiences 'a final going home'.[17] My experience is the inverse: instead of changing my body to fit society's conception of what my body should be, society is changing its language to fit me. Understanding my attachment to non-binary plays an important role in my choice to focus on understanding the ways that non-binary is constructed and how it functions as a gender category.

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[15] Richards and others, p. 95.

[16] Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 488.

[17] Jay Prosser, 'No Place Like Home: The Transgendered Narrative of Leslie Feinberg's Stone Butch Blues', *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, 41.3 (1995), 483–514 (p. 488).

Methodology

This analysis is based on in-depth, face-to-face, one-on-one, semi-structured interviews conducted in 2016 and 2017 with ten individuals in Melbourne, Australia who self-identified as non-binary. The only conditions for participation were that participants identified as non-binary at the time of the interview, were over eighteen years of age, and resided in Melbourne. The participants ranged in age from twenty-one to thirty and were recruited with a snowballing sampling of informal on- and offline networks. Seven of the participants self-identified as white, and three as People of Colour [PoC]. One of the participants self-identified as Jewish, and one had a migrant background. The participants all signed a written form consenting to participate. All the participants chose a pseudonym by which they would be identified in the research. The interviews ranged from forty-two to seventy-eight minutes and were recorded on a digital recording device. This research was approved by the University of Melbourne Human Ethics Advisory Group.

A semi-structured interview method was used, which meant that the participants were active in the co-creation of meaning, and could guide the interview in the direction that they considered the most relevant to their lived experience.[18] This was done through asking the same questions at the start of every interview ('What words do you use to describe your gender?' and 'what does [the word/s you used to describe your gender] mean to you?') and then allowing the participants to guide the conversation and talk about the things that they considered central to their experience of non-binary. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, and thematically coded.[19] A thematic analysis was used to analyse the data, informed by principles of phenomenology and how the participants made sense of their lived experiences.

An analysis of power differentials was necessary in considering my status as a non-binary person conducting research with other non-binary people. The power differential in the interview moment has been identified as hierarchical by feminist researchers, with the researcher holding the power and the research participant as relatively powerless.[20] These researchers attempt to subvert this power differential and suggest that one way of doing this is through the method of in-depth interviews. The use of in-depth interviews allows 'access to people's ideas, thoughts and memories in their own words other than the words of the researcher'.[21] However, by employing a queer approach to research, which destabilises identity categories and foregrounds the relational

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[18] Lenore Lyons and Janine Chipperfield, '(De)constructing the Interview: A Critique of the Participatory Model', *Resources for Feminist Research*, 28 (2000), 33-48; Kay Standing, 'Writing the Voices of the Less Powerful: Research on Lone Mothers', in *Feminist Dilemmas in Qualitative Research: Public Knowledge and Private Lives*, ed. by Jane Ribbens and Rosalind Edwards (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 1998), pp. 186–202.

[19] Johnny Saldaña, *Fundamentals of Qualitative Research* (New York: Oxford, 2011).

[20] Sharlene Hesse-Biber, 'Feminist Approaches to Mixed Methods Research: Linking Theory and Praxis', in *SAGE Handbook of Mixed Methods in Social & Behavioural Research*, ed. by Abbas Tashakkori and Charles Teddie (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2016), pp. 1–40; Lyons and Chipperfield.

[21] Shulamit Reinharz, *Feminist Methods in Social Research* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 19.

and social construction of the self as 'contingent, multiple, and unstable',[22] I was able to understand that the researcher/researched dynamic was not a binary, but a complex relationship in which the participants were active participants in the construction of the interview moment.[23] Thus, breaking down the dichotomous power relation of researcher/research participant allowed me to see that the interviews served as a co-creation of meaning between myself and the participant.

Initially, I considered myself an 'insider', a researcher that shares a particular trait with the participants, as opposed to an 'outsider, someone that doesn't share that trait.[24] However, coming from a queer approach, these identity categories are destabilised, and this destabilisation 'allow[s] us to be both insiders and outsiders simultaneously'.[25] All subjects are constituted within 'multiple intersecting discourses' who experience their identities as fluid, never comfortably placed on either side of a binary, but being constantly de/constructed within the research moment.[26] Although I shared the characteristic of non-binary gender with the interview participants, we all embody different and intersecting social, cultural, political and economic locations. Thus, simply sharing the trait of non-binary gender with participants does not make me an 'insider', as we share both similarities and differences in the multiple, complex constitution of our identities. Although my non-binary subjectivity allowed me access to the non-binary participants through existing queer and non-binary networks, I do not consider myself an 'insider' as such, but simply a researcher that shares one particular trait with the participants. In employing this queer methodological approach, I was able to consider the differences as well as the similarities between my experience and that of the participants, and ensure that I did not rely on my non-binary status to do the analytic work.

'Non-Binary' and 'Trans'

In the past, academic discourse has reflected the marginalisation of non-binary as a gender category. Recently, however, academic research has increasingly focused on the subjectivities of non-binary people, and of people whose genders conceptually align with non-binary. Genders that conceptually align with non-binary include genderqueer, gender non-conforming, pangender, genderfluid, androgynous, gender variant, and genderfluid.[27] In mainstream media, the use of the

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[22] Kath Browne, 'Queer Quantification or Queer(y)Ing Quantification: Creating Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual or Heterosexual Citizens through Governmental Social Research', in *Queer Methods and Methodologies: Intersecting Queer Theories and Social Science Research*, ed. by Kath Browne and Catherine J. Nash (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2010), pp. 231–49 (p. 4).

[23] Lyons and Chipperfield, p. 2.

[24] Sandra Acker, 'In/out/Side: Positioning the Researcher in Feminist Qualitative Research', *Resources for Feminist Research*, 28 (2000), 189–208 (p. 202).

[25] Ibid.

[26] Linda Alcoff, 'The Problem of Speaking for Others', *Cultural Critique*, 20 (1991), 5–32 (p. 21).

[27] Herman, Harrison and Grant; Tre Wentling, 'Trans* Disruptions: Pedagogical Practices and Pronoun Recognition', *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 2.3 (2015), 469–76; Herman, Harrison and Grant; Wentling; Sue Rankin and Genny Beemyn, 'Beyond a Binary: The Lives of Gender-Nonconforming Youth.', *About*

term 'non-binary' is prevalent, but exists alongside many other terms such as gender neutral, genderqueer, and genderfluid.[28]

A shortcoming within the academic literature on non-binary is that it primarily focuses on both binary trans genders and non-binary as necessarily related terms, and non-binary is frequently described as a 'trans' identity category.[29] However, as identified by Connell, considering these terms together ignores the specificities of the particular social locations occupied by different gender identities.[30] The discourse surrounding trans subjectivities focuses primarily on binary trans experiences, that is, the experience of trans men or trans women, and marginalises those that do not fit into this binary frame.

The words 'trans', 'transgender', and 'transsexual' are used throughout the literature as umbrella terms to describe people whose gender does not align with the gender they were assigned at birth.[31] For those whose genders do reflect the sex they were assigned at birth, the term 'cis' is used. Cis is a term that 'describe[s] individuals who possess, from birth and into adulthood, the male or female reproductive organs (sex) typical of the social category of man or woman (gender) to which that individual was assigned at birth'.[32] Building on this term, Ansara and Hegarty identify the ideology of cisgenderism, or the systemic privileging of cisgender experience over any other gendered experience.[33]

As trans and gender theory have flourished, the definition of the term 'trans' has been contested.[34] I do not refer to the non-binary participants as trans unless they specifically stated

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Campus, 17.4 (2012), 2–10; J acobsen and Donatone; Lynda Johnston, 'Gender and Sexuality I: Genderqueer Geographies?', *Progress in Human Geography*, 40 (2015) 668-678; Frohard-Dourlent and others; Stewart; Beemyn; Budge, Rossman and Howard; Corwin; Jacobsen and Donatone; Lenning; Richards and others.

[28] Mary Emily O'Hara, 'Miley Cyrus Just Dropped a Bomb about Her Sexuality', *Daily Dot*, 2015 <https://www.dailydot.com/upstream/miley-cyrus-genderqueer-foundation/> [accessed 3 April 2017]; Vera Papisova, 'Amandla Stenberg Opens Up About Using They/Them Gender Pronouns: "I'm Allowed to Explore Myself"', *TeenVogue*, 2016; . National Geographic, *Special Issue: Gender Revolution: The Shifting Landscape of Gender*, 2017; Katy Steinmetz, 'Beyond "He" or "She": The Changing Meaning of Gender and Sexuality', *Time*, 2017 <http://time.com/4703309/infinite-identities-gender-sexuality-young-people/> [accessed 3 April 2017]; Tierney Bonini, 'Gender Fluid: Girl, Boy, Non-Binary', *ABC News*, 2016 <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-03-23/gender-fluidity-boy-girl-non-binary/7270260> [accessed 6 May 2017]: Marc Cuenco, 'Jaden Smith Opens Up About Being A Gender Neutral Style Icon To "GQ" & It's Truly Inspiring', *Bustle*, 2016 <https://www.bustle.com/articles/147896-jaden-smith-opens-up-about-being-a-gender-neutral-style-icon-to-gq-its-truly> [accessed 3 April 2017]; Leesa Smith, 'Sam Wears a Boy's Uniform but Uses Both Toilets at School: "Genderqueer" Student, 18, Who Identifies as Neither Male or Female Is Just Looking for Aceptance', *Daily Mail Australia*, 2015; Erika Jarvis, 'Ruby Rose: "I Used to Pray to God That I Wouldn't Get Breasts"', *Guardian*, 2014 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jul/25/ruby-rose-video-break-free-gender> [accessed 3 April 2017]; Bonini.

[29] Frohard-Dourlent and others; Wentling.

[30] Raewyn Connell, 'Transsexual Women and Feminist Thought: Toward New Understanding and New Politics', *Signs*, 37.4 (2016), 857–81 (p. 865).

[31] B. Aultman, 'Cisgender', *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 1.1–2 (2014); Frohard-Dourlent and others.

[32] Aultman, p. 51.

[33] Gavriel Y. Ansara and Peter Hegarty, 'Cisgenderism in Psychology: Pathologising and Misgendering Children from 1999 to 2008', *Psychology & Sexuality*, 3 (2011), 1–24.

[34] Connell; Stephen Whittle and Susan Stryker, *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. by Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York: Routledge, 2006); Wentling.

that they identified with trans as an identity category, as 'not all trans people have non-binary identities, and not all non-binary people identify as trans'.[35] Therefore, in this article I employ the term 'trans' as an open category that denotes a person with a gender different to that which they were assigned at birth who identifies with the label. Given that not all non-binary people identify as trans, non-binary deserves a separate discussion that builds on insights from trans studies. In academic literature, non-binary has been used as 'an umbrella term to include people whose gender identities do not neatly fall into the dominant gender categories of 'man/boy' and 'woman/girl'',[36] as a term that 'defies the assumed normativity, naturalness, and expectations of ontological gender',[37] as a 'catchall term for gender identities other than man and woman',[38] and as an umbrella term for those people who 'have a gender which is neither male nor female and may identify both as male and female at one time, as different genders at different times, as no gender at all, or dispute the idea that there are only two genders'.[39] In this article I do not use non-binary merely as an umbrella or catchall term, but as an open category for which the only condition of inclusion is self-definition as non-binary. This framing allows greater recognition of participant agency, by not including people in categories with which they do not personally identify.

Gender (Un)intelligibility

As gender serves as 'a condition of cultural intelligibility', those persons whose genders do not align with the normative binary gender categories of male and female are limited in their ability to understand themselves and their gendered experiences.[40] This was reflected in the interviews, where a number of the interview participants expressed a sense of not being able to understand their gendered experience because the words to describe it did not exist within the available discourse. The participants communicated the perceived impossibility of thinking one's gender as something apart from the two binary categories, as well as feeling that the only way they could survive in the world was by adhering to one of the two binary gender categories. This was especially evident in the way that the participants spoke about language. This was a factor central to the experience of many participants, as without the language of non-binary, they were unable to understand their gender and thought they were 'wrong'. Thambi summed up this sentiment:

> [It's] incredibly difficult for people, especially when people are at the phase of
> their gender identity questioning where they don't have the vocabulary to
> understand that they maybe identify with [non-binary]. It nips that in the bud if
> people don't have anyone to talk to and it's just like, oh, well, maybe I'm wrong,
> maybe that weird little thought in the back of my head that I might not be a man

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[35] Frohard-Dourlent and others, p. 3.
[36] Frohard-Dourlent and others, p. 2.
[37] Stewart, p. 290.
[38] Corwin, p. 2.
[39] Richards and others, p. 95.
[40] Butler, *Undoing Gender*, p. 52.

> or a woman is just me being wrong, because how could I possibly survive if that
> was the truth?

As one condition for being considered human is adherence to one of two binary gender categories, non-binary people are explicitly excluded within mainstream discourse. Ari expressed the difficulty they had in understanding their gender within the binary discourse:

> I had absolutely no understanding except that I would have no future, that
> was really the only thing I knew, that I had to completely go from one [binary
> gender category] box to the other if I wanted to survive.

Here, Ari described how, within the available discourse, the only way they could understand themself was as one of the two binary gender categories. Any deviation from these binary categories would mean that they had 'no future'. In this way, then, non-binary people exist as the 'abject border or as that which is strictly foreclosed: the unliveable, the nonnarrativizable [sic], the traumatic'.[41] Thambi expressed this sentiment:

> I tried being hyper-feminine for a bit, but it was just so off and weird and I felt
> uncomfortable but I didn't know there was another option, like, I didn't know
> that I could just not do that and be ok.

However, the participants explained that non-binary lives can be articulated, albeit currently only in certain discourses, and therefore brought into the realm of the intelligible. Participants expressed how their non-binary gendered selves existed in what Hale describes as these 'nearly unspeakable spaces' that are marginalised within the available discourse.[42] The lack of language to express how they felt about their gender meant that imagining their gender outside of the binary frame was foreclosed until they were able to access the language of non-binary. Frankie outlined their experience: 'for most of my life it's not even acceptable to be thinking about those things, like, "this thing would be really cool to wear" or whatever, you can't even entertain that thought'. The participants thus described the way that their understanding of themselves as non-binary was foreclosed because the idea of non-binary was unimaginable within the hegemonic cultural discourse. A result of this lack of existing vocabulary in mainstream discourse is that non-binary people have had to construct 'new discursive tools' to explain their particular social and cultural gender location, as I expand upon later in this paper.[43]

Violence and Erasure in the Grey Areas

Another crucial aspect of gender unintelligibility is the social responses that are evoked when one expresses an unintelligible gender. In the interviews conducted, participants explained how they were exposed to violence due to the unintelligible nature of their gender in mainstream society. Violence, here, is defined broadly as the use of power to control a person in a way that causes

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[41] Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter on the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 188.
[42] Hale, p. 319.
[43] Hale, p. 338.

them harm.[44] The two main themes of violent responses were: the social violence of not being understood, of being subsumed into binary categories and their non-binary position being made invisible; and the physical and verbal violence of being punished for transgressing gender categories.[45] This violent policing of the boundaries of gender categories, due to non-binary people's transgression of these boundaries, highlights the precariousness of lives that challenge the male/female binary. According to Butler, the 'invariable public dimension' of living means that lives are precarious, 'already given over, beyond ourselves, implicated in lives that are not our own'.[46] In this way, subjects are exposed to the possibility of violence as a condition for their lives to be considered lives at all. Violence as a result of the transgression of gender norms is characterised as 'genderbashing' by Namaste.[47] For Namaste, genderbashing, or the violent assault of those who transgress gender norms, 'is fundamentally concerned with policing gender presentation'.[48] This violence, in the form of social non-recognition and erasure or physical and verbal attacks, works to police gender at the borders of categories.

The theme of social non-recognition and erasure was expressed throughout the interviews. Erasure, in this sense, refers to the instances in which the discursive organisation of society leads non-binary people to 'disappear from view'.[49] This supports Kate Bornstein's claim that 'gender ambiguity and gender outlaws are made invisible in this culture'.[50] Existing in a world that makes space only for those who fit into one of the two binary gender categories means that non-binary people are forced to draw on binary gender norms in order to live as social beings. Thambi stated that 'it's frustrating because it's sort of like we have to appropriate an already existing gendered vocabulary in order to fit ourselves in as non-binary people'. This frustration at the inescapability of gendered language and norms was expressed by other participants too. Frankie explained their relationship with erasure:

> A lot of the time I don't even exist, and if I do, I'm either read as not a good enough boy, not a good enough male, or I'm read like a girl, a woman, and treated as such, or I'm read as a freak that doesn't fall into either [category].

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[44] This definition is developed out of the definitions provided by: World Health Organisation, *World Report on Violence and Health*, ed. by Etienne G. Krug and others (Geneva: World Health Organisation, 2002); South Eastern Center Against Sexual Assault, *The Young Women's Respect, Protect, Connect (RPC) Manual*, (2011); Viviane K. Namaste, 'Undoing Theory: The "Transgender Question" and the Epistemic Violence of Anglo-American Feminist Theory', *Hypatia*, 24.3 (2009), 11–32; . State of Victoria, 'Royal Commission Into Family Violence: Summary and Recommendations. Volume IV.', IV (2016).

[45] South Eastern Center Against Sexual Assault, p. 25.

[46] Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, pp. 26-28.

[47] Viviane K. Namaste, 'Genderbashing: Sexuality, Gender, and the Regulation of Public Space', in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. by Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 584–600 (p. 584).

[48] Namaste, 'Genderbashing: Sexuality, Gender, and the Regulation of Public Space', p. 585.

[49] Namaste, 'Genderbashing: Sexuality, Gender, and the Regulation of Public Space', p. 586.

[50] Kate Bornstein, 'Gender Terror, Gender Rage', in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. by Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 236–43 (p. 238).

Frankie explains how their non-binary subjectivity is erased as they are interpreted either as one of the binary gender categories, and therefore wrongly included into these categories, or they are interpreted as entirely unintelligible and unable to be gendered at all, and therefore excluded all together. Similarly, Joey poses the question: 'if I am more femme presenting as an AFAB person, will I be erased?'.[51] This erasure also intersects with other aspects of non-binary people's identities. Thambi explains this in relation to their identity as a person of colour:

> If you're a man of colour, people hate and fear you, and if you're a woman of colour, people hate and undermine you, [and] as a non-binary person of colour you don't exist at all, which is really, really difficult.

The erasure experienced by Thambi highlights how, even within non-binary and queer communities, the experiences of people of colour are marginalised, and non-binary people of colour experience a particular exclusion due to their gendered and racialised location in a way that white non-binary people do not.

There are also other aspects to this erasure of non-binary subjectivities. Frankie explained that there is a certain feeling of safety in this erasure, because when they are included into a binary gender category, they are seen as 'something that's within the realm of vague social acceptability, rather than like, you're a fucking freak who I'm going to yell at'. Here, Frankie highlights the precariousness of living as a non-binary person who is unintelligible, of being seen as a 'fucking freak' within the hegemonic discourse, and having to deal with various types of exclusion and violence because of this unintelligibility. In this way, non-binary people experience exclusion at a discursive, social level, which works either to dehumanise them, or to bring them back into the realm of the human by including them in the hegemonic, binary categories.

Another commonly experienced aspect of the precariousness of non-binary life is vulnerability to physical violence. Violence against trans people has been widely acknowledged and researched,[52] and this research can be applied equally to the lives of non-binary people, as non-binary, gender variant and trans people all exist as marginalised groups within a larger social structure predicated on binary gender.[53] Violence against trans and gender variant

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[51] AFAB stands for Assigned Female At Birth.

[52] Darryl B Hill, 'Genderism, Transphobia, and Gender Bashing: A Framework for Interpreting Anti-Transgender Violence', in *Understanding and Dealing with Violence: A Multicultural Approach*, ed. by Barbara C. Wallace and Robert T. Carter (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2003), pp. 113–36; Daniela Jauk, 'Gender Violence Revisited: Lessons from Violent Victimization of Transgender Identified Individuals', *Sexualities*, 16.7 (2013), 807–25; Shannon E. Wyss, '"This Was My Hell": The Violence Experienced by Gender Non-conforming Youth in US High Schools"', *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 17.5 (2004), 709–30; Kyla Bender-Baird, 'Peeing under Surveillance: Bathrooms, Gender Policing, and Hate Violence', *Gender, Place and Culture*, 23.7 (2016), 983–88; Jeremy D. Kidd and Tarynn M. Witten, 'Transgender and Transsexual Identities: The next Strange Fruit—hate Crimes, Violence and Genocide against the Global Trans-Communities', *Journal of Hate Studies*, 6.31 (2010), 31–63.

[53] 'Gender variant' is here used to describe anyone whose gender does not neatly align with the hegemonic categories of 'male' and 'female', who does not fit into the categories 'non-binary' or 'trans'.

people has been understood as 'gender terror',[54] 'genderbashing',[55] 'hate violence',[56] an 'alarming public health problem',[57] and 'a global pandemic of focused prejudice'.[58] Kate Bornstein names those who use violence towards trans people as 'gender defenders'.[59] These gender defenders 'bang their heads against a gender system which is *real* and *natural*, and who then use gender to terrorize the rest of us'.[60] Similarly, Namaste explains the way that violence against '"transgressive" bodies is fundamentally concerned with policing gender presentation'.[61] Namaste suggests that violence against trans and gender variant people serves as a defence of the public sphere, a space that can only be entered through 'the enactment of a sanctioned gender identity'.[62] Kyla Bender-Baird continues this project and draws on Michel Foucault's idea of disciplinary power to explain violence wielded against trans and gender variant people.[63] For Bender-Baird, 'public space is not a neutral space, rather it is where power is enacted'.[64] Thus, violence against trans, non-binary and gender variant people is used as 'a form of punishment designed to reaffirm gender norms as binary' and restrict who is allowed to safely access both public and private spaces.[65] Similarly, Jeremy Kidd and Tarynn M. Witten suggest that this violence results from a 'transgression of traditional gender norms',[66] and Daniela Jauk posits that this violence is a 'negative sanction to gendervariant presentation'.[67] Further, Jauk, Kidd and Witten, and Hill all note the structural nature of violence against trans and gender variant people,[68] and highlight the way that violence is embedded in 'a culture that denigrates and devalues transgender lives'.[69]

Violence was a central theme in the interviews. Bee expressed how 'messing with people's concepts of gender is hard to do because it means you put yourself in a really vulnerable position'. Joey also experienced this vulnerability because of their transgression of gender norms:

> I walked past these two cis guys and they were just like 'what the fuck' and I felt awful about it, but it was also like, that was exactly the reaction I wanted out of them as well. But it's like, how far can you push these things before someone pushes you back?

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[54] Bornstein.
[55] Namaste, 'Genderbashing: Sexuality, Gender, and the Regulation of Public Space'.
[56] Bender-Baird, p. 987.
[57] Jauk, p. 807.
[58] Kidd and Witten, p. 31.
[59] Bornstein, p. 236.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Namaste, 'Genderbashing: Sexuality, Gender, and the Regulation of Public Space', p. 585.
[62] Ibid, p. 589.
[63] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage, 1979).
[64] Bender-Baird, p. 984.
[65] Ibid, p. 987.
[66] Kidd and Witten, p. 38.
[67] Jauk, p. 821.
[68] Jauk; Kidd and Witten; Hill.
[69] Hill, p. 4.

Camy also experienced this, as a non-binary person who was assigned male at birth (AMAB):

> I used to wear make-up and do my brows and nails all the time and felt really good about the way I looked when I did that, but was questioned or harassed about it pretty much every single day.

Frankie explained their experience similarly: 'you cop some sort of violence for that, you get teased or you get bullied or you get beat up or whatever, for transgressing these gender norms'. This exemplifies Namaste's concept of 'genderbashing', the violent assault one faces when one transgresses gender norms.[70] Butler explains this experience of violence by non-binary people in a similar way:

> On the level of discourse, certain lives are not considered lives at all, they cannot be humanized, that they fit no dominant frame for the human, and that their dehumanization occurs first, at this level, and that this level gives rise to a physical violence that in some sense delivers the message of this dehumanization that is already at work in the culture.[71]

In this way, then, the experiences of the non-binary people interviewed exemplify the ways that violence functions to regulate bodies. The boundaries of the human are enacted through violence, a violence inflicted upon those who challenge these boundaries, or live their lives in the border zones.

Unintelligibility and Opening Up Space for Self-Definition

Although the unintelligibility of non-binary gender can render non-binary people vulnerable to violence, these are not the only consequences of the ways that the participants negotiated this unintelligibility. The idea of self-definition was expressed by participants, who felt that the lack of cultural intelligibility had both positive and negative aspects. In particular, the multiplicity of gendered subjectivity are evident in the way that participants were able to (re)define their gender apart from the binary categories. For Bee, figuring out how to define and express their gender was difficult due to a lack of resources and representation:

> I think I'm potentially still on a journey [to understanding my gender], and I think probably a lot of us are, because there is so little in the way of resources to figure out how we feel about these things, and we're doing a lot of self-determination and self-definition.

Frankie also expressed this sentiment through highlighting the positive aspects that come from existing in a space apart from binary gender categories:

> I suppose you do realise a certain agency in coming to those realisations, you're like oh wow, I can do gender differently, I don't have to be a man, I don't even have to be a woman, I can just be a human and navigate this gendered world in the best ways that I can.

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[70] Namaste, 'Genderbashing: Sexuality, Gender, and the Regulation of Public Space'.
[71] Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, p. 34.

Here, Frankie also highlighted the way that non-binary people are forced to exist in a world that is highly gendered along binary lines. Ari describes a similar feeling; however, they also describe the way that this unintelligibility can lead to a feeling of being lost:

> I think discovering that you're not a man or a woman it's like OK, but what do I wear, where's my rulebook? […] If I don't wear a suit or if I don't wear a dress like what am I supposed to do? And I think that's why a lot of us, in some ways, are really empowered and really enlightened, and also really lost.

Participants expressed a certain feeling of possibility as well as anxiety which can come from living a life that is unintelligible within mainstream discourse. Existing within this border zone opens up space for living differently. However, in challenging the dominant gender norms, non-binary people live a life that is considered not-quite-life, at the boundaries of what is considered human. Butler highlights how living in 'the anxiety of that challenge, to feel the surety of one's epistemological and ontological anchor go' allows for the borders of the human to be opened up, and for the 'human to become something other than what it is traditionally assumed to be'.[72]

Accounting for Ambiguity and Multiplicity in Gender's Border Zones

To have a fuller understanding of how the language of non-binary allowed the participants to call themselves into being, it is important to understand how non-binary can be understood as a gender category in itself. Participants explained the way that they felt about their gender: articulating non-binary as a distinct, non-normative gender category with open, permeable borders. A common theme in the interviews was that the norms of binary gender categories failed to account for the complex nature of participants' lives. Ari highlighted this: 'I don't know anyone who isn't some sort of mosaic pattern of masculinity and femininity'. For these participants, taking up a non-binary identity meant that their gender more fully represented who they are as people. As noted by Hale, 'we cannot fit ourselves into extant categories without denying, eliding, erasing, or otherwise abjecting personally significant aspects of ourselves'.[73] Throughout the interviews, participants expressed that, in coming into their gender as non-binary, they were able to accept themselves more, and understand themselves as something other than subjects that are included or excluded within the mainstream binary gender categories. For Xy, non-binary 'doesn't have that [idea that] you are a certain way so people see you and they expect mannerisms and personality traits when they shouldn't'. Similarly, Joey talked about how non-binary 'definitely helped me feel more comfortable in my skin and more comfortable playing around with my gender identity'. Bee also explained how non-binary encompasses all people: 'what does a non-binary person look like? The whole concept of non-binary means that it shouldn't look like anything'.

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[72] Butler, *Undoing Gender*, p. 35.
[73] Hale, p. 336.

To understand how non-binary functions as a gender category, I draw on Hale's idea of gender's border zones.[74] Although Hale's work focused on 'ftm' subjectivities,[75] his framework is very useful for understanding non-binary as a gender category. Hale suggests that those people who do not fit into either binary gender category exist in the border zones, zones that exist at 'the overlapping margins of distinct categories'.[76] Hale employs this idea of the border zone in order to make intelligible those who exist 'abjected from social ontology'—in this instance, those whose genders are something other than simply male or female.[77] For Hale, this unintelligibility within social ontology provides those whose genders do not align with the binary with subject positions located within gender's border zones. These border zone positions are constructed through 'creative boundary marking' and the use of 'new discursive tools', such as the development of the term and category of 'non-binary', which allows these marginalised individuals to be included in a way they were unable within the mainstream discourse.[78]

As a way to resolve the problem of non-binary seeming to reject gender categories altogether, I argue that non-binary can be understood as an open gender category that does not have a specific set of social and cultural norms as conditions of taking it up as an identity. The participants talked about how non-binary as a category allowed them to be ambiguous and contradictory in their gendered experience. For Joey, their gender has a 'playful' element that 'doesn't feel as set in stone or locked in' as male or female. For Ari, non-binary means:

> recognising that there are grey areas […] I think being non-binary is really
> acknowledging that in myself and that I will never be clear-cut and
> understood even by me, I don't even get myself all the time and that's OK.

This ambiguous nature of their gender is reflected in how the participants think about non-binary as a gender category. For Thambi, non-binary 'means not really being a man or a woman but not really having to be at some point in between either […] it's something else'. Non-binary is this 'something else', something that isn't simply male or female.

However, non-binary people are forced to draw on gendered norms, as they exist within a discursive space that is highly gendered along the male-female binary. As Thambi stated: 'we have to appropriate an already existing gendered vocabulary to fit ourselves in as non-binary people'. As there is no outside to the gender system, non-binary is forced to exist at the borders of the binary categories: this current gendered order is all there is.[79] Non-binary

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[74] Hale.

[75] For Hale, 'ftm' is a term that denotes a specific social group of subjects who have masculine subjectivities, however they may define it, who were assigned female at birth, and have experienced female embodiments for some of their lives.

[76] Hale, p. 319.

[77] Hale, p. 336.

[78] Hale, pp. 332-336.

[79] Sara Salih, 'On Judith Butler and Performativity', in *Sexualities and Communication in Everyday Life: A Reader*, ed. by Karen E. Lovass and Mercilee M. Jenkins (SAGE Publications, 2006), pp. 55–68 (p. 59).

functions as a border zone category, a category that exists at the edges of binary categories. In this way, non-binary people draw on norms from the binary categories, but their repetition of these norms does not constitute them as a binary gender, but as 'something else', something non-binary.

Frankie explained how they felt that taking up the category of non-binary means that they 'can do gender differently', that they do not have to live up to norms that they would if they were male or female. Similarly, Joey expressed that for them, 'so many people think of the world in a very black and white, boy and girl kind of way, and I really love being in this grey area in between that's not really either'. Non-binary can be thought of as a grey area that exists in the border zones of the binary gendered categories.

Non-binary can also be thought of as a permeable category, for which the only condition of inclusion is identifying as non-binary. Although much of queer theory works to deconstruct categories, it can nevertheless be useful to take up identity categories strategically. Butler explains that 'some people very much require a clear name and gender, and struggle for recognition on the basis of that clear name and gender'.[80] Feinberg writes that 'it's hard to fight an oppression without a name connoting pride, a language that honours us' in regards to 'transgender' as a category.[81] Similarly, non-binary can be productively taken up as a gender category in order to allow non-binary people to survive in a world constructed for their non-existence. Hale contends that formerly unintelligible gender positions can become understood within a 'restructured social ontology'.[82] Thus, as non-binary becomes better understood within society, the hegemonic gendered order can be unsettled, and space can be made for categories to emerge that allow for expressions of self that are multiple, fractured, ambiguous, and contradictory.

Conclusion

Non-binary exists as a discursively constructed gender category, distinct from the binary categories of male and female, that has material implications for those who fit within its borders. Drawing on data collected in interviews with non-binary subjects, I have demonstrated how non-binary can be understood as a border zone gender category that exists at the overlapping margins of the existing binary categories but can be understood to be distinct from those categories. As such, non-binary people experience an element of unintelligibility of their gender until they can call themselves into being with the language of non-binary, which renders non-binary a viable gender category for their inclusion. This unintelligibility also plays out in non-binary subjects' interactions in wider society—because some non-binary people are seen as unintelligible, or as transgressing gender boundaries, they

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[80] Sara Ahmed, 'Interview with Judith Butler', *Sexualities*, 19.4 (2016), 482–92 (p. 490).
[81] Leslie Feinberg, 'Transgender Liberation: A Movement Whose Time Has Come', in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. by Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 205–20 (p. 206).
[82] Hale, p. 338.

face physical and social violence as others attempt to police their gendered subjectivities. Another consequence of this experience of unintelligibility is a feeling of exclusion from the gender system itself. This feeling of exclusion is particularly punishing, as there is no outside to the gender system. Participants, however, exist at the 'abject borders' of the human, against which a liveable life is defined.[83] This border zone existence allows space to be opened up at the margins of gender categories for queer gender categories to emerge, and non-binary is an example of this.

The boundaries of the human are constructed through adherence to binary gender categories, and non-binary people exist in the border zones of intelligibility. The unintelligibility of non-binary subjects functions in two ways. The first way is that interview participants experienced their gender as unintelligible to themselves, and thus were foreclosed from thinking their gender as anything other than the binary categories. However, they manage to push the boundaries of the human to include them, and live liveable lives in gender's grey areas. Unintelligibility functions in a second way, through non-binary people's experiences of violence. This violence is employed to regulate and police gender expression, and to bring those who transgress gender boundaries back into the realm of the intelligible, or exclude them entirely. In this way, non-binary can be understood to function as a non-normative category that opens up understandings of gender to make space for diverse gender experiences.

Although non-binary people are not single-handedly destroying the normative and regulatory gender binary, they do challenge and disrupt binary assumptions in many ways. This unsettling of binary assumptions about gender also allows for non-binary people to express themselves through critically interacting with gender norms. For Bee, 'to be queer is to challenge the norm'. Although non-binary people exist within a particular discursive realm, a realm in which imagining gender is constrained by binary norms, these norms can be opened up and challenged through their unfaithful repetition. Frankie describes how their unfaithful repetition of gender norms is 'disrupting, it's forcing [other people] to think about gender just by walking past them'. Here, Frankie explains how their public non-binary identification disrupts the gender system and forces those around them to consider the nature of gender, simply by existing in the world as a non-binary person.

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[83] Butler, *Bodies That Matter on the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'*, p. 188.

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