

LIFE ISN'T BINARY

ON BEING BOTH, BEYOND, AND IN-BETWEEN

by Meg-John Barker and Alex Iantaffi

Publication Date: May 21, 2019

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WHERE
ISN'T
SOMETHING

ON BEING BOTH, BEYOND, AND IN-BETWEEN

MEG-JOHN BARKER AND ALEX IANTAFFI

FOREWORD BY CN LESTER

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S. BEAR BERGMAN

PRAISE FOR *LIFE ISN'T BINARY*

“A work that acknowledges and celebrates a diversity of experiences, opinions, and forms of knowledge—including the fact that this diversity must inevitably include conflict.”

CN Lester, from the *Foreword*

“Barker and Iantaffi’s feel-good approach will reassure readers questioning their gender identities and expand any reader’s philosophical horizons.”

Publisher’s Weekly

“Recommended for readers seeking self-help books that reflect the complexity of contemporary life.”

David Azzolina, *Library Journal*



For Immediate Release

LIFE ISN'T BINARY

ON BEING BOTH, BEYOND, AND IN-BETWEEN

by Meg-John Barker and Alex Iantaffi

In their second book, *Life Isn't Binary*, Meg-John Barker and Alex Iantaffi argue that non-binary identities acknowledge the complexity of human experience and offer new ways to understand gendered representation. Their guide suggests identity, behavior, and attraction supercede the supposedly logical imperatives that demand accordance with traditional gender roles. Beginning where their first book, *How to Understand Your Gender*, left off, Barker and Iantaffi gather examples ranging from *Janelle Monáe* to *Brokeback Mountain* and Disney Pixar's *Inside Out* as they examine the assumptions that underscore contemporary discussions about sexuality, gender, relationships, bodies, emotions, and ultimately thinking itself.

“Life Isn't Binary isn't strictly a personal account, a self-help book, or an academic resource,” writes CN Lester, author of *Trans Like Me*. “The authors bust myths, ground the hardest concepts in snarky pop culture references, build on community experience and learning, share multiple points of view, and open up about their own lives.”

Combining their experience as academics, activists, and practicing therapists, Barker and Iantaffi illuminate how everyone can benefit from unpacking the binaries that have taken residence within them. Packed with exercises, reflections, writing prompts, and therapeutic guides, *Life Isn't Binary* proposes topics such as intersectionality, race, and disability are not debates but experiences that afford us the opportunity to reconsider and reconfigure our relationship to the world.

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BIOGRAPHIES

MEG-JOHN BARKER PHD, MA, PGCFHE

THEY / THEM / THEIR

Meg-John Baker is the author of a number of popular books on sex, gender, and relationships, including *Queer: A Graphic History*, *How To Understand Your Gender*, *Enjoy Sex (How, When, and IF You Want To)*, *Rewriting the Rules*, *The Psychology of Sex*, and *The Secrets of Enduring Love*. They have also written a number of books for scholars and counsellors on these topics, drawing on their own research and therapeutic practice.

rewriting-the-rules.com | megjohnandjustin.com | twitter: @megjohnbarker

ALEX IANTAFFI PHD, MS, LMFT, SEP, CST

THEY / THEM / THEIR

HE / HIM / HIS

Alex Iantaffi is the co-author of *How To Understand Your Gender* and *Life Isn't Binary*. As a recovering academic, they have researched and published extensively on gender, disability, sexuality, and relationship issues. Alex also works as a therapist and supervisor at their own clinical group practice, Edges Wellness Center LLC, on Dakota and Anishinaabe territories, currently known as Minneapolis, Minnesota (US). They are passionate about healing justice and writing as a form of personal and collective healing. Alex is also the host of the podcast *Gender Stories*.

alexiantaffi.com | twitter: @xtaffi

MEG-JOHN BARKER



ALEX IANTAFFI



FORTHCOMING

You can find more writing by Meg-John Barker and Alex Iantaffi in the upcoming Jessica Kingsley Publishers anthologies *Trans Love* and *More Than Gender*. Meg-John and Alex are currently co-authoring a self-care workbook.

Meg-John's new book *Gender: A Graphic Guide* will be out in Fall 2019. They are working on several future projects around erotic fiction, consent, and gender, sex, and relationship diversity.

Alex is working on *Do Conflict Better!*, a trauma-informed illustrated guide on better communication through conflict, as well as a book for mental health providers that considers the cultural, historical, and social trauma of gender as a rigid binary.

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FOREWORD

CN LESTER

One of the most insidious side effects of the authoritarian backlash of the last few years has been the forcing of marginalized people into a defensive position. Hostility towards those of us who challenge society's binaries is common: inescapable in public spaces, at work, at home, at school. Too often that hostility bleeds over into outright violence: the immediate violence of personal attacks, and the cumulative violence of denial, exclusion, and victimization.

In the face of this backlash we're frequently compelled to explain ourselves as oddities and unfortunates: "Why would I choose to be this way if I could avoid it?" "Don't you think I wish I could be different?" With our safety on the line, sometimes this feels like the only way of being heard. Sometimes this is the story we tell others and, repeated over and over again, it can easily become the story we end up telling ourselves.

But there are other ways—and *Life Isn't Binary* demonstrates these insights and techniques in a way both accessible and profound. Living beyond a binary—of gender, of sexuality, of body and mind—can lead to new sources of both knowledge and happiness. The suffering we experience does not cancel out the wisdom we gain, nor the possibilities for new ways of living. An awareness of the co-existence of these disparate, contrasting elements is at the core of the wisdom we gain. And this wisdom is not limited to one category of identity, or one subset of person, but is something that we can all contribute to, learn from, and share.

Let's be clear: this is no niche issue. While some aspects of non-binary thinking and feeling—non-binary genders, for instance—may seem new, the problem of rigid binary categorization is an old one that affects us all. "Us vs. them" polarization, and the political movements that feed off the hatred this builds, is wrecking damage on a global scale. Tackling binaries isn't an academic exercise, but something that cuts to the heart of who we are, as individuals and as societies. And in this book, Meg-John Barker and Alex



Iantaffi face this polarization head on, with both understanding and potential solutions.

Life Isn't Binary practices what it preaches; it isn't strictly a personal account, a self-help book, or an academic resource. Instead, Barker and Iantaffi craft a work that avoids "either/or" in favor of "both/and". The depth of research on display is exemplary, but this is more than just a textbook or a non-fiction guide. Alongside engaging information on vital social issues—intersectionality, race, disability, sexuality, gender—there's an invitation for readers to craft their own journey through exercises, reflections, writing prompts and therapeutic guides. The authors bust myths, ground the hardest concepts in snarky pop culture references, build on community experience and learning, share multiple points of view, and open up about their own lives. A generosity of spirit and lightness of touch runs throughout the book—no matter how heavy the topic, I never felt preached at or talked down to.

I've been living an openly non-binary life for two decades now, in terms of my sexuality, my gender, and my experiences of mental and physical illness and impairment. I blithely assumed that I'd be familiar with most of the topics covered in *Life Isn't Binary*—I was excited and intrigued to be proved wrong. Barker and Iantaffi introduced me to non-binary concepts I'd never heard of before—ecosexuality for one—and repositioned subjects I thought I knew inside and out so that new facets sparkled into view. Throughout the book I felt, by turns, comforted, challenged, fascinated, turned off, turned on. I didn't agree with everything I read—and that in itself is one of the most original aspects of *Life Isn't Binary*. This is a work that acknowledges and celebrates a diversity of experiences, opinions, and forms of knowledge—including the fact that this diversity must inevitably include conflict. The authors encourage us to explore even negative emotions—anger, sadness, disgust—as sources of insight and creativity—an approach that resonated with me in a profound and necessary way. This is not a didactic and exclusionary book, but a welcoming and open-ended one.

It's a common assumption that only non-binary people care about non-binary issues: that queer theory is only for queer people, that only people of color need to talk about racism. Not only is that assumption wrong, but it leaves all the heavy lifting to the people already carrying the heaviest burdens. I was so glad to find a work—this book—which starts with the knowledge



that these issues are everybody's business. I'd certainly recommend *Life Isn't Binary* to my non-binary friends—but I'd be even more likely to put it in the hands of those who've never even considered that they might have something to gain from these experiences and ideas. The questions addressed aren't just “might I be trans?” “might I be bisexual?” (although if those are your worries then read on, validation lies ahead)—they're “who am I, in relation to others?” and “how do I make sense of the injustices of the world?” It's about how you want to define yourself (or not)—but also an invitation to think about just how big, deep, and expansive the world can be. The world is always changing and, right now, the number of people identifying outside of binary categories is one of the biggest and most obvious of those changes. Whether we're at the heart of that movement or watching it with bemusement from the edges, we owe it to ourselves and to each other to learn more. But beyond that, we have a chance to use these issues as prompts to greater understanding and greater possibilities. Barker and Iantaffi have written the book we all need for this moment in time. I'm so grateful that they have.

CN Lester
Author of *Trans Like Me*



CONVERSATION

Meg-John Barker and Alex Iantaffi



Alex Iantaffi Most people will be familiar with the term non-binary in terms of gender identity. But for those who aren't as familiar, can you explain what the term means?

Meg-John Barker Non-binary is considered a subset of transgender, which refers to anyone who didn't remain in the gender they were assigned at birth. In terms of gender identity, non-binary is a fairly new term. We've had what you might call a non-binary movement for 5-10 years. Non-binary people often do not experience themselves as either male or female. But the really important thing to say is that it's a big umbrella, so it encompasses a lot of different experiences. Some people experience themselves as having

no gender or being a-gender or gender neutral. Others experience their gender somewhere between masculine or feminine, or man or woman. Some people experience a bothness, that they have both a masculinity and a femininity. For some it's a fluid movement between different genders. They might experience themselves as different genders at different times. And yet for others it's completely beyond that male or female binary. They feel like they've got a different gender. Or, their gender is interwoven with their sexuality or spirituality. So there is a real vast array under the umbrella of non-binary.

AI My initial understanding, too, was that non-binary came under the transgender umbrella. I don't know about you, but I find more and more people who do identify as non-binary might not necessarily identify as transgender. It's really kind of separate—for some people, it goes together, you know. Like, for myself, I'm trans and non-binary. But for some folks they would identify as non-binary but not necessarily as trans.

MJB Some people also question the binary of cisgender and transgender, and that's part of why they don't see non-binary as part of trans. Or, other people associate trans with a certain kind of journey, say a medical journey, that they're not taking. But some non-binary people do take a medical journey as part of a transition. I think the takeaway message is that non-binary encompasses a massive range of genders. Just like man encompasses a massive range and woman encompasses a massive range as well.

AI Non-binary is vast landscape. And just because someone says they're non-binary doesn't really mean we understand their identity or experience. But I love what you said about how, in some ways, non-binary identities and thinking can even challenge that trans/cis gender binary, which is one of the things we talk about in the book.

MJB The Western world is catching up with ways of understanding gender that have been present in many cultures across the globe for a long time. Understandings that, in some ways, the West has tried to eradicate. So we need to really think about it in terms of colonialism and its history as well.

AI It's impossible to talk about gender identities and non-binary gender without talking about that colonial piece. I notice adults talk about young people changing their understandings of gender as if non-binary identity is a new thing. I'm almost 50, and there are other non-binary folks who are older than me! But we are moving away from this Anglo-centric understanding of gender. Looking a bit more globally, acknowledging that genders outside of this binary understanding have always existed all over the globe in indigenous cultures. There's been an attempt to eradicate these non-binary identities in language, in culture, in spirituality, in all sorts of ways. Yet those gender identities and expressions have resisted. In fact, we see a resurgence! So this is not new.

MJB It's not new, it's a resurgence! Should we talk about our own identities? Have you always identified as non-binary?

AI No, I have not always identified as non-binary. Gender has always been rather confusing for me. I didn't really know the concept of transgender or non-binary growing up. I would get really excited when people mistook me for a boy as a teenager. I was assigned female at birth. It was a long time before I realized that that is not a common experience for people who are assigned female at birth. Some girls would become quiet offended if they were mistaken for boys around that time, as teenagers. But, for me, there was always something that didn't quite fit with the way culture and society wanted to put a gender on me. Like the way I was expected to navigate the world. The clothes I was expected to wear. I was expected to sit down with all of those things, but I didn't have the language. Then, in my late twenties, I started to encounter more language around gender queerness. But I had this misunderstanding that gender queerness was equal to androgyny. And I didn't feel androgynous and my body didn't feel like it fit in with a dominant image of androgyny that seemed to be pretty skinny—and I'm not very skinny! There was a lot of intersections there for me to grapple with. So I sort of started with genderqueer and then I went into identifying as trans. But trans didn't keep either, so I drifted toward transmasculine. And, finally, when this term non-binary started to become more and more visible, I realized my identity is non-binary and my gender presentation is masculine. But it's kind of a feminine masculinity. I think that writing *How*

To Understand Your Gender with you even changed my understanding of my own identity as this kind of transmasculine but also femme-y masculine, non-binary person. So I would say that now I identify that way.

MJB I mean, again, gender identity is this work in progress. I guess we both wrote about how we identified our gender in *How To Understand Your Gender*. I suspect that we'd write something a bit different today. I remember when I first came across the kind of people being more than one gender in the same person. Bigender people, for example, who experience shifting between different genders. I remember thinking that that didn't sound like my experience. It even sounded a bit weird when I first heard about it. But that's where I've ended up! The idea of people being plural selves—the sense of a plurality of selves and a plurality of genders—is something that we explore in *Life Isn't Binary*. I would say that I really liked seeing different sides of me being differently gendered. There are parts of me that still feel quite woman. I was assigned female at birth. But there are also parts of me that feel very much man and there are parts of me that don't feel that gendered at all. Being able to identify those in myself has been an exciting part of the progress. The process, really, the ongoing sense of a journey with gender.

AI I love this idea of not being a singular self. You wrote about it in such an accessible way. I think, for me, being non-binary is about embracing all the parts of myself. The self is far more complex that can be summarized in any one identity, right?

MJB Exactly, and I think that's why we felt compassion about this project really. To expand this idea of non-binary way beyond just sexuality and gender, to actually think about all these things in non-binary ways.

AI Why do you think people are comfortable with the concept of non-binary sexualities but struggle to apply non-binary thinking to the other areas of life?

MJB In the book we acknowledge that people aren't necessarily comfortable with non-binary genders or sexualities. And when we're talking about non-

binary sexualities we're talking about the things people normally label as bisexual or pansexual or queer. Something between and beyond gay and straight. And, yeah, in the book we say there is still a lot of biphobia and queerphobia, there's a lot of invisibility when it comes to bisexuality. It's the same with non-binary. There's also suspicion and treating these gender and sexual identities as if they are not real. Or, like you said, that it's just a phase. People are not comfortable with non-binary identity. It seems that people really like the binary. But at least they are aware of it. People aren't even used to thinking about the whole binary. So, when we try to go unpack that in the book, we ask *What are the binaries? What are the binaries that govern our thinking about bodies? Or, about emotions?* And we unpack each of them. With emotions, for example, there are binaries like positive and negative feelings, like being mad or being sad. Or, with bodies, there's being abled or disabled, there's being well or sick. In the book, we look at those binaries and the hierarchies that are implicated in those binaries. Because usually one side of the binary is seen as more normal or better than the other.

AI I've been thinking a lot about why we have this attachment to binary thinking. Maybe it's because I'm writing this other book, actually two different books, through the lens of trauma. , For example, settler colonialism is a form of historical social and cultural trauma. I'm thinking about how trauma can lead to these all-or-nothing patterns. Settler colonialism is all-or-nothing, this-or-that, either-or. Settler colonialism says, *You're with us or you're against us. We're human and those other folks are less human. We can take their land.* It says, *We can even understand the land as property or as something that can be taken or owned.* Under this separation, under this othering and severing that happens. Is that the word? This cutting-off of relationships between us and the rest of the world. Whether it's the land, whether it's other people. We've created this dichotomy, this binary division in our culture that I think we're starting to feel.

MJB And that binary division plays out everywhere. The media suggest everything is a debate between two sides. Including whether or not trans people exist, which is something we talk about in the book. There's no awareness about what having those binaries does to people. There's no two sides to that debate because it isn't a debate. And, like you say, gender is so

ancient when you look at its history, which is something I've been doing for another project. Binary gender goes back to the agricultural revolution, it goes back millennia. So it's really, really hard to shift it. But I think these different identities and different ways of thinking about gender identities are beginning to shift in Western culture.

AI I think there's a real yearning to move beyond this dichotomous, binary thinking about ourselves, our bodies, our identities, our relationships, and our emotions. Mostly because people are starting to see the damage. When we divide emotions into good or bad, for example, it's not really helpful. And this happens even in popular culture. I'm thinking about the Pixar movie, *Inside Out*. The movie is about how all the basic emotions are needed for organic self-development. But Pixar seems unable to take the sad-phobia out of their movies, including *Inside Out*. There are things I really love when moving beyond this good or bad emotions idea. But ultimately, it can be argued that non-binary is still a label—just like gay or straight. So why do you think people are fixated on labeling themselves and others?

MJB When it comes to non-binary identities, there is often this accusation that frustrates me: *Why are you fixating on labeling yourself?* I've even heard queer scholars say, *Why are bisexual people and non-binary people fixating on labels?* But in the same talks they'll happily use labels like straight or lesbian or trans. There is this idea that somehow bisexual and non-binary people need to get beyond labels in a way that other people don't. I think the problem is that we live in a time that is very based on labels. So, to expect some of people, the most marginalized and most invisible people, to go without labels is not very helpful. Unfortunately, at the moment, if you're going to get support—if you're going to get healthcare, if you're going to get rights—labels are necessary. You need labels that the government understands if you're to receive rights and recognition. Broadly speaking, I agree with the idea that it would be good to get beyond labels. But I think assuming we can just automatically leap there after a millennia of patriarchy . . . it's probably not going to happen. So perhaps this is a step along the way.

AI I totally agree. I think there is this bypassing that people want to do. Oh, it's fine that we labeled ourselves as man or woman or straight or gay. But

they don't want to think about less binary labels like bisexual, pansexual, or fluid. *Why do you all have to label yourselves?* I see that as wanting to get to the goal before we are at the goal. Going back to the question, I also think that as humans we're storytelling, meaning-making people. And labels can be helpful if I'm reorienting myself to an environment. *Who is like me? Who's different from me? Where's safety? Where's comfort?* Labels can be helpful with finding each other, finding community. I recently recorded a podcast episode about language. I talked about how language and labels can help us find one another. In terms of being able to create momentum in social justice movements, for recognition of full humanity and full citizenship for a lot of folks, including non-binary folks, finding one another has been new. So, yes, in an ideal world maybe there would be no labels. But I don't know if that's possible given how our minds works. What is it that is so threatening about the label non-binary? Why does there seem to be so much resistance to it? Other labels seem to be more acceptable.

MJB People often get upset at the marginalized for having labels and at marginalized groups for labeling others. Words like heterosexual and cisgender annoy heterosexual and cisgender people because they don't want to be seen as having a gender or having a sexuality. But we need to name privileges. We need to name whiteness, for example, because we can't look at something critically without naming it.

AI Because otherwise the resistance is *We don't want to be labeled because we are the default*. As long as we don't label the default, then we can't really look at the idea critically. When we only label transgender or non-binary people as having a gender, it means that the gender of cis folks goes unscrutinized. We assume that cisgender is normal or the default. But to explore the entire gender landscape, we really need to have more specific terms that describe different identities and experiences. And if those identities and experiences don't apply to people, those people get to say that. A lot of cis people ask me permission as a non-binary person. They say, *I'm kind of non-binary, but I think I'm cis*. I tell them I'm not the pope of non-binary or trans identities! I can't tell somebody what their identity is if they're questioning their gender identity or expression. And that's totally okay!

MJB That's why I always just say to them, *Come on in, we need more people!* If you think non-binary might apply to you, brilliant, excellent, we need more people.

AI Exactly. If you identify as cis but have a non-binary expression, or you have a non-binary identity but a more cisgender expression in the world, that's fine!

MJB Who's trans enough, who's non-binary enough, who's queer enough? We end up with these hierarchies even within queer communities. Sometimes people have a lot of privilege in the world and want to claim a more marginalized identity without interrogating their privilege. But there are others who are even more invisible because they aren't seen as expressing their marginalized identity. Because they're not visibly non-binary, they're seen as lesser.

AI In the book, we talk most about the complexity of intersectional identities. Because for some folks—white folks with non-binary identities, for example—it's safer to express those non-binary identities visibly in the world. But it's less safe for other folks. Black, indigenous, immigrant, and other folks of color talk about how it is not as safe for them to express non-binary identities in the by and large Anglo-Western dominant culture.

MJB We have to be cautious when we judge anyone. And, as opposed to taking a label as a means of bypassing that work, we need to interrogate where we're at in all those intersections. We need to recognize that we can't judge anybody else's trans-enough or queer-enough status.

AI We can use labels with open hands, with intention. Or, we can grasp at them with everything we've got. But sometimes I find when I do that, I want to keep other people out. I'll admit it—I have these moments where I'm totally at this moment of like, *Fine, you identify as non-binary. But you don't look non-binary. And that's not going to be the same experience for you in the world.* I ask myself, *What is going on inside you, Alex, that you feel you have to police the boundaries of this identity, which by way, is not just yours, so it doesn't belong to you?* Because there is no one way of doing non-binary identities.

You don't have to look gender-conforming or -nonconforming to be non-binary. Those are just small moments of really internalized oppression.

MJB Yeah, I think you're right. We fall back into that internalized oppression. That's one of our examples in the last chapter of the book where we talk about thinking non-binary. We just come up with a number of ways that people might try to experiment with a different kind of thinking. I think open up—*What is an open-up? What is a close-down?*—is a nice both-and option. Pretty much anything in the world will open up some things and close down others. We challenge the idea that we can find perfect, good, happy, right ways of doing things that will include absolutely everyone and always just be great. It's actually more helpful to think, What does it open up and close down? Maybe we should find the paths that open up more than they close down. But recognizing there is an inevitability to some close-downs even when things open up.

AI That way of thinking, for me, is more relational. Because the other way of thinking—*Let's find the thing that's perfect, that's good, that's the best*—is actually part of the settler-colonial mentality. I think all of us can fall into that trap. Moving toward this both-and, relational of knowing ourselves and others, I think, is so important. I don't know, I think it's a shift that's needed in the world because we wrote about it. So there you go.

MJB We question the idea that there are only binaries in terms of love. Single versus couple. Monogamous versus non-monogamous. Friend versus lover. Why do you think dominant culture prioritizes romantic love to the detriment of other relationships and friendships?

AI In Anglo-dominant culture, there's this idea that romantic love is superior to other kinds of love. That if we have to choose between our partners and friends, our partner should come first. First of all, that's not how I was brought up. There was a lot of conflict in the way I was brought up in southern Italy. Especially around the tension between romantic love and partners and family of origin. Because family of origin is incredibly important in Italy. It's not unusual to have intergenerational families living close to each other, living or taking holidays together. This idea that romantic

relationships are kind of superior is not universally or globally true. Again, it's this very specific, cultural lens. For me, that's really important to think about. *What is the cultural lens that we were brought up with? Are we even aware that there is a lens there? Do we think that that's the world for everybody? What is the lens that we're coming from?* I recommend your work all the time for people who are working on relationship agreements with one another, with what relationship agreements are. Whether it's partnerships or friendships of any kind.

MJB Yeah, I guess that was my starting point. To question why we put certain relationships above others. It's not about putting friendship above romantic relationships or family. It's just pausing to think about it. My partner and podcast co-host Justin Hancock and I explore this idea of intentional relationships quite a lot. *Why is this kind of bond worth more than that kind of bond? How do we make the relationship fit the people involved rather than trying to push it into a certain model?* Just questioning those hierarchies really. Then helping people find their own way. Letting each kind of love be what it is and letting it be a work in progress. I guess this is another way of doing something non-binary—to see things as kind of an ongoing work-in-progress. So, in the same way that some genderfluid people might see their gender as this ongoing journey, maybe that's another way that we can see relationships. Because it allows for that flexibility and change over time, it may be a little more helpful. Rather than the idea that we have to stay static and always be the same.

AI I also think romantic love is a pretty modern and culturally specific idea. When I was in grad school, one of my close friends was planning an arranged marriage. She really believed that was a good way to go. The thoughtfulness that went into that process made it easy for me to agree. Because even in Italy people would still arrange relationships with the involvement of family members to make sure that everyone's interests were matched. Why is it better to base a long-term partnership on love rather than communal or community-based interests or individual preferences? It's another binary between individual and community. What's the best way to create our lives? Again, we question why we assume a certain way of doing relationships are automatically better than others.

MJB Our relationship did start back in the day as a romantic, erotic one. That didn't seem to work out so well for us. Once we found this creative friendship, we connected through projects, likemindedness, and the different expertises we brought together. That seemed to be a really good basis that we've just built and built and built it on. It's one of my longest, long-lived relationships. Apart from the one with my sisters, I guess. That's a really close, really genuine relationship.

AI We've been in each other's lives for a really long time. We met when I was pregnant with my first kiddo, who is now 15. Our romantic relationship was really short-lived compared to how long we've been friends then writing and creative partners, right? In some ways, if we had seen the end of that romantic relationship as a failure, we might not have given ourselves the opportunity to go through the loss, stay with that loss, and come to this place where these aspects of our relationship are really beautiful and creative. And we're still connected! We are still in each other's lives, which I think is really beautiful. We've come a long way. Remember when we thought we could do all the things and juggle all the things—and maybe we couldn't?

MJB Your mess is your message.

AI *Your mess is your message!* I love that. So now you know our secret. Our mess is our message. If we're writing about something and we feel wise, it's probably because we're really struggling with it. Maybe we should have done several essays. Because there are so many questions about relationships. But bodies and relationships are also connected. Our bodies are this beautiful, resistant landscape which cannot be confined into these small binaries. When we try to confine our bodies into the small binaries of sick or healthy, fat or thin, working or not working, it just doesn't work. Because our bodies are so much more expansive. I think that's the word I'm looking for. Which is maybe why I felt there was a connection between bodies and relationships. We desire to contain and categorize relationships in the same way that we desire to contain and categorize our bodies. But our bodies are much more expansive than our categories.

MJB Absolutely, absolutely. Which is kind of what we say about gender as well. This idea of expensiveness is a really good one. But it's so often limited by the capitalist culture that pervades in the West.

AI Capitalism likes to make our bodies into commodities. If our body is a commodity that is to be traded, you know, the capacity of our bodies, our time, our energy, our physical and emotional effort, then everything is monetized and everything has to be categorized to be monetized.

MJB And this is before and after the binary that's promised, isn't it? The promise rides on these binaries and offers the promise of transforming sad to happy, fat to thin, ugly to beautiful, poor to rich. But these promises are all based on problematic binaries in the first place.

AI Exactly! Fix this and you'll be desirable, you won't be single, which is undesirable. All those things are kind of connected. Capitalist culture suggests you can take care of your children while never being sick. But my mind is like, *I can't be sick, I'm too busy!*

MJB Yes, we'll see how that works out for you. Because, you know, that internalization is the first sign of culture. Which is why we've included reflection points where we invite the reader to take some time out or engage in a reflexive activity. What was our thinking behind that? You came up with that idea for our first book *How To Understand Your Gender*, right?

AI Yeah, I did. It comes from being a somatic experience practitioner. As a therapist, I pay a lot of attention to all of our ourselves and our bodies. Because even talking about our bodies as if they are not us is a bit weird. We have a tendency to get lost and freewheel in the world of our ideas. So for ourselves, let alone for the readers, we try to set aside time to just take a breath and slow down. Bodies are so much slower than our prefrontal cortex. Having a minute to slow down and see how ideas are settling. Acknowledging that we might have some feelings or asking if this is an opportunity to take care of ourselves. They are there as an opportunity to slow down, to reflect, to take care of yourself. When I get excited, I even forget to go the bathroom! I know it seems so basic, but I'm so excited, I'm

talking about something and I'm not taking care of my basic needs.

MJB And, again, it fits with the non-binary. Some cognitive psychologists have suggested that when we think fast we tend to go to those habitual responses, which would include really binary thinking, either-or, us and them, etc. Whereas if we can slow down and be more mindful and more reflective, that may enable us to see the complexity. Certainly, in my experience, I realize that I'm more likely to see the complexity, for example, in a conflict if I can slow down and take my time.

AI Absolutely. And from a trauma perspective that also really helps. Because if I'm more coming from a place of reactivity, where my nervous system is freaking out, where I'm reacting to feeling threatened, or where I'm reacting to my fear of abandonment. But when I slow down, I can see what's mine and where I'm coming from. I can give my prefrontal cortex time to come back online. It's creating that pause that gives us an opportunity to be more intentional basically. We were trying to create that pause in the book. We

wanted to give people the opportunity to digest the content of the book. But also be more intentional in how they want to relate to that content.

MJB How do we think non-binary thing could improve our readers' lives?

AI That's where we take a pregnant pause.

MJB Conflict and suffering were the two big ones that came up for me. The big struggles of human existence when you think about it. I feel like non-binary thinking is heavily implicated in both conflict and suffering. We are often driven toward non-binary thinking if we are struggling with ourselves or with another person or people. In us-versus-them thinking, we polarize into these opposites. We try and figure out how we're in the right. Or, we go the other way and decide we're all wrong. *It's all their fault and not my fault. It's all my fault and not their fault.* Either way it causes suffering for ourselves and the other person. So there is a lot of binary in conflict. Even when we struggle over ourselves, we can easily go between I'm a good person or I'm a bad person. I've always been stalked by that fear that I'm bad underneath.

Again, the way we understand the self as relational, as embodied, as plural—that actually gets away from that idea that we can be all good or all bad. So, yeah, binary thinking holds a lot of conflict and suffering. Frankly, just experimenting, playing, and shifting habits to non-binary forms of thinking can be really good for alleviating some of that.

AI I completely agree. Non-binary thinking really helps us be more relational. More relational with ourselves. Seeing ourselves as part of broader humanity. More relational with one another. It helps us stay in relationship with what I call the broader web, or network, of life. If I'm thinking non-binary, I'm not thinking about me and the land as separate, I'm thinking about me and the land as being in relationship. I'm thinking about me and the food I consume as being in relationship. I'm thinking of myself and the rest of life as being part of the ecosystem. For me, as a systemic therapist and a systemic thinker, non-binary thinking is essential to being in relationship within this beautiful ecosystem, which makes my life so much better when I can stay in relationship with it.

MJB That's the challenge of this kind of thinking as well. Because it goes so far beyond sexuality or gender. I can't really think non-binary about those things without seeing all the other areas as well. That challenges me to relate to other species, to the planet, to the people who I might think of as the other. It's a challenging journey, but a rewarding one. It's the same journey toward less individual suffering. But also toward being implicated, hopefully, in this suffering from a social justice perspective.

AI I think that's a good segue into my final question. What is the main point we would like readers to take-away from the book?

MJB I think that would be the secret point that we've hidden, which is the answer to life, the universe, and everything. And we've hidden it carefully in the book. So that you'll had to read the whole thing.

AI Isn't that the answer to 42?

MJB Yes, I think so, and I'm glad you came up with that one.

AI I think we said what the main point is for us, which is this relation where we're part of an ecosystem. Non-binary thinking really helps us move in that direction—collectively, not just individually.

MJB The implication is that we have to learn to value all bodies, all lives, all labor, all those things. We need to value them all equally rather than having these binary hierarchies, which value some over others.

AI And we need to do that without bypassing the fact we live in an oppressive system. Because I think that often there is this a form of spiritual bypassing where we want to be at the angel, you know? It's this paradox where, yes, we want to value everyone and we need to acknowledge that at the moment, that's not where we are. So centering more marginalized and oppressed voices is essential to that process.

MJB Big fact. If people want to shift their thinking in a more non-binary direction, what's the first thing they should do? I guess the first thing to say is take a more stepping-stone approach rather than leaping into some kind of non-binary utopia overnight. Compassion and kindness, too, that would be my thought. That's pretty much the first step on every journey in this realm. You can't get very far until you're kind to yourself. That's a lifelong journey. That's a struggle—we still struggle with that. But, yeah, that would be my first stepping-stone on the way to non-binary thinking.

AI I agree. I often say that if I had a magic wand and there was just one thing that all of my therapy clients could take away from any of the work we do together it would be the capacity for self-compassion, because it's such a challenge. I know, for me, acceptance needs to come—comes before—compassion. The Buddhist piece around radical acceptance. Radical acceptance of self. *This is who I am, I am a human, and this is my history, and this is what happened to me.* I really want people to understand that acceptance is not resignation. Resignation is passive. But acceptance is active. I think acceptance is what moves us toward the possibility of action and compassion. Accepting who I am or what my legacy is in terms of its intergenerational, historical, and cultural legacy. Accepting what I

carry within me from my ancestors in terms of trauma but also in terms of wisdom. If I can accept that, and I can accept others for where they're at, then there is the possibility of action and compassion. Which is much greater than if I tried to deny what is—if that makes sense.

MJB So much sense. That's an ongoing struggle for everyone. That's not easy, it's the first stepping-stone but also the last stepping-stone. Because it's going to take awhile to get there—if you even get there fully. But it's a good thing to aspire to and a good thing to practice in daily life. Don't beat yourself up when you find it hard.

AI Just being on that journey. It's something I will try to do everyday. I have to give myself pause for sure. It's called a practice for that reason. So that one day I might reach the acceptance that I long for.

HOW TO UNDERSTAND **YOUR GENDER**

A practical guide for exploring who you are



ALEX IANTAFFI and MEG-JOHN BARKER

Foreword by S. Bear Bergman

FOREWORD

S. BEAR BERGMAN

It has been a few years since I have had the experience I am about to describe, but I don't imagine it will seem unfamiliar or surprising to any transgender/non-binary/genderqueer person: I filled out a ream of forms and submitted them, and received a letter instructing me to present myself on a particular date and time, for purposes of evaluation. The language related to the evaluation varies, depending on time and place, cultural or economic power, but the purpose of the evaluation is constant: 'Today we will find out who you think you are, and we will determine whether we believe your answer can be trusted.'

Whether any individual's answers can be trusted by the gatekeeping medical establishment will be determined using a matrix that seems scientific, but isn't. In fact, it's an audition of respectability; the more 'respectable' you seem to your interlocutor—the more middle class, the more nicely-groomed, the more clean and sober, the more theoretical, the more composed and controlled—then the more likely you are to be believed and therefore approved of.

If you are well able to rise to a single occasion and give the expected answers, the more likely you are to be approved of. There is no aggregate score—no one is keeping track of your cumulative performance—it's now or never, today with this stranger or not at all. Being approved of is the goal. Being disapproved (or disproved) is the blow that ricochets you back beyond the gates to try again, elsewhere, someday. Maybe.

(The narrative is familiar even to people who have never agonized over the right outfit and hairstyle for one of these meetings; like Madge, we are soaking in it. We all know, even those of us who don't know first-hand, that trans and genderqueer and non-binary people's gender identities are always subject to scrutiny, always revocable, and always, always suspect. Don't believe me? Then why do you think the first question any trans person gets asked upon disclosure is, 'Have you had the surgery yet?' What is that but a



question of further investigation, an opportunity for a stranger to arrogate to themselves the right to decide if they think you're really trans or not? If you really deserve the pronouns or name or respect you have asserted; if your transition is sufficient for their purposes? The fact that they know absolutely fuck-all about transness and are an adjunct lecturer in mathematics or a librarian or a dental hygienist or a tenth grader gives them zero seconds of pause about whether they really know enough to be interrogating. Trust me.)

For most of the last 75 North American years, that has been our method for welcoming people into a space of medical transition. First the paperwork, then the audition, and then, if you're good (as in, if you've 'been good', in the way of vice principals and your dourest auntie), and you've been lucky, some access. But gosh oh golly, it has not always been this way. It can be difficult to tell people how much it has not always been this way. All of our modern memory about trans people begins with the Center for Transsexuality and Dr Harry Benjamin. Frequently I'm asked, 'Why did there start being trans people right around World War II?' or, 'What did trans people do before they could have surgery?' These lines of questioning are always very alarming to me, even though it's perfectly reasonable that people might not know.

They wouldn't know, of course, because all of that information has been systematically, purposefully, and quite violently erased. Colonization took it, and wadded it into a small ball and (literally, actually, as Balboa did in Panama) fed it to a dog—those who resisted conversion were killed, and Christianity, as practiced in the time, had no room at all for anyone beyond the gender binary of male and female, even though prior to colonization many, many indigenous societies had neutral-to-positive words, social roles, and legal standards for people we might today name as transgender in some way. So there's a giant whistling void in our history across large swaths of the world, a void which might otherwise have yielded hundreds of years of custom, law, ceremony, ideas, and ideals about trans and genderqueer and non-binary lives. An artificial void, like there would be if you created the meanest black hole you can imagine—one that makes only that of which it disapproves of disappear completely.

In the shadow of that imposed and curated void, as trans people have been determinedly popping back up again in this crack and that crevice, and not being quite as vigorously plucked or squashed, cis people have a lot of



questions. Like, why is this suddenly a thing? It's not, pumpkin.

A few threads and fragments of our history have escaped and survived—a few poems, some paintings, a couple of legal decisions—and we cherish them. They feel like reassurance, like validity—we have always been here; this has always been a thing. It may be that being a gender outlaw is still a radical act, but it is, as j wallace skelton writes, a radical act with a long history. But for a while, the suppression of our identities was so encompassing that we never even got enough light and air to sprout, never mind to grow and bloom. Now, like flowers reclaiming a meadow, we are popping out all over. Trans and genderqueer and non-binary are not remotely new things. That they—that we—are now visible in greater number than during any time in recorded history is just the natural order, reasserting itself.

In the time before gatekeeping, before the Harry Benjamin Standards, before medical intervention, before Piers Morgan shouting at people about their genitals on broadcast television, it was possible in many places to discuss one's gender with community members, elders, and friends. Professional intervention wasn't available, except to the degree that religious leaders might have been considered skilled workers and might have offered their advice, or even rulings, about the future roles and responsibilities available to a person.

What's most pleasing to me about the book you are currently hold—and there are many things about it that are very pleasing indeed—is that it feels like the beginning of a return. A return to the days in which our explorations of our own place in the lovely, spacious galaxies of gender were introspective and collaborative with others of our same experience, not performative and assessed with tick boxes. To be guided, tenderly, through questions and considerations of gender, to be not just allowed but encouraged to explore and play as a means of learning about one's own gender, feels like such a relief after the way things have been for such a while now.

Imagine if a person didn't feel as though they had to build and then justify their gender identity, if they could just experience it and then explain it.

I often wonder what's ahead for gender outlaws in the world—what the next ten years will bring (and sometimes what the next ten days will bring). I hope, always, for movement toward the destigmatizing, demedicalizing, and decolonizing of gender as a thing in the world. It's a relief to start seeing tools and matrices, concepts and frames, that put the power of our gender back



with us—with people who are experiencing our own behaviors and desires. I appreciate and applaud all attempts to allow us, as j wallace skelton teaches, to be our own experts, and I am excited for you, dear reader, that perhaps you will never have to fill out a ream of forms and spend \$20 you don't have on a taxi to be sure you won't be late to an appointment you don't feel ready for. Well done to you for investing in this book—and in yourself—instead. Read on.





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