

# Adventures in time, gender and therapeutic practice. Embracing a queer systemic way of working with gender expansive families

Amanda Middleton

Volume 5

Issue 2

Winter 2022

## Keywords:

*trans,*  
*transgender,*  
*queer, therapy,*  
*mirror balls,*  
*chrononormativity,*  
*gender, queer*

## Citation Link

## Abstract

*This paper is an adaption of a keynote address delivered at the Association of Family Therapy Conference 2022.*

Gender attracts our attention. The reference points for this living and lived concept are changing as people inhabit new truths and reclaim ancient wisdoms of gender. Therapists face the challenge of holding multiple and heart-felt truths about what gender can be in the context of increasingly polarised views of what gender should be. In this paper, I examine how binary gender, created by pathologising colonial practices restricts the psychotherapeutic imagination of what gender and sexuality can be. I encourage practitioners to leave what Hare-Mustin calls the mirrored room (1994) in which dominant socio-political discourses limit possibilities. I discuss how installing a mirror ball, a symbol of queer joy and celebration, in practice spaces would create a fracturing and queering of discourses reflecting wider lived experiences, communities and language practices.

\*\*\*\*\*

This talk, now paper, hopes to be an adventure of sorts, daring and risk-taking in the way it talks openly about genitals and colonial violence, as well as time, normativity, and emotional homelessness. Throughout these perhaps challenging themes I invite you, the reader, take good care of yourself as you make your way.

Let me begin with some questions

- Are you are currently working alongside trans, nonbinary and/or gender expansive folks?
- Are people in your family and networks trans, nonbinary or gender expansive?
- Have you danced under a mirror ball?

Now I invite you to ask yourself, "Do I want how I inhabit my gender at the moment to expand? And if so, what would my image for this be?"

What would this look like for you?

Many systemic and family psychotherapists are part of co-creating new wisdoms in gender as we live and practice, allowing space for expanded relational knowing, for new queer realities of family life to unfold through our ethical curiosity (Fielding, 2021) and inclusion of trans experience. I am grateful to those who are showing up to this work with grace and a firm commitment to depathologising our practice.

I want to start this paper by offering four acknowledgments:

Firstly, I want to acknowledge that this is a particular moment in time where our attention is pulled between crises (Simon, 2021a). Where one pandemic bleeds into another (covid is to white supremacy, is to the ecological disaster we are currently inhabiting) and where the task of thinking as a way of resisting the totality of violence becomes ever more important and yet more difficult to do. As the violence we are steeped in becomes ever more obvious and present, especially to those of us that have been taught, trained and cajoled into not seeing this violence. Violence that has shaped the world around us, creating a privileged few and marginalised many. Violence that, as Allan Wade reminds us, is diluted by the language that society uses (Coates and Wade, 2007). Violence that, Paul Preciado tells us, has shaped how we understand existence (Preciado, 2013).

I was struck when systemic psychotherapist, Gwyn Daniels, lecturing to a group of systemic trainees just as the war in Ukraine was breaking out, said part of the purpose of violence is to stop us thinking. Reminding us that continuing to think when violence is present is partly how we resist it. Learning more about the colonial and patriarchal violence perpetuated by empire is a difficult but necessary task we all must engage with. And it can evoke a kind of shame in not knowing enough, not having known and in now knowing about the impact of colonialism. Conversations after the Queen's death have shown us how the British public occupies some very different places in relation to this knowing right now. As you read, I urge you to stay with the challenges that this paper might bring. To keep thinking in spite of the violence.

This is a time where it is essential that we use our energy to highlight oppressions as distinct, uniting to focus our efforts towards change in a singular way, with a singular focus. Whilst at the same time the borders and boundaries between things seem more blurred. The interrelationships and interweaving are impossible to find a way out of. We find ourselves navigating in a necessary saturation of multiplicity, fluidity and flux.

Understanding and thinking cannot be divorced from the intersections and crossroads of who we are and how this shapes us and is shaped by the worlds around us. Our race, class, health status, ethnicity, gender and sexuality infuse to create our selfhood. Attempts to separate out these elements of ourselves create what feminist and philosopher, Maria Lugones, calls a curdling of the self (Lugones, 1994). A split which leaves us feeling spoiled, lumpy, inedible. We pour ourselves into the moulds available to us to create ourselves, these moulds pressing in the form of injustice and discrimination for some.

Secondly, though I write about gender and transness, I am not trans. I can never know that experience, with all its discomfort and discrimination as well as the joys and homecoming it offers. However, I do embrace the idea of trans writers Travis Alabanza and Juno Roache, that we are all trans (Roache, 2020). Meaning, that if we remove that odd process where someone assigns us a gender at birth, a gender that creates a set of possibilities for who we can be, based on the shape and size of our genitals, if we remove this procedure, currently so fundamental to being human, then we can all grow into

being us - rather than somebody else's idea of us within the system of binary gender conformity. We can all transition. The binary gender system doesn't really work well for anyone. It keeps us captive to a harmful construct that allows a few people free access to power and privilege. The illusion of comfort offered by this system leaves many of us feeling uneasy, narrowed, claustrophobic even.

Thirdly, I want to find an elegant way to acknowledge the inevitable dating of the language and concepts that I use and the ideas that I pose. I apologise to those reading these words in the future and those living right now in a future that I haven't yet visited. To those who have already developed freer and more inclusive ways to say and live what I write here, I apologise for what might now fall heavily, harshly or somewhat out of sync. What I say will likely be undone, rewritten and need to be recalibrated. It is important that we honour this undoing, it is our responsibility as, what Vikki Reynolds calls "fluid and imperfect allies" (Reynolds, 2010, p. 13), to be accountable for our mistakes, maintain the growth required of allyship and keep trying to do well by the marginalised communities that we hope to support and celebrate but are not members of.

Fourthly, I need to acknowledge and thank those that have gone before and paved the way for this paper. There are so many unseen and unheard conversations, interactions, and relationships that have allowed me to write this piece. I especially want to honour the queer and trans people who have lived in refusal of patriarchal gender and sexuality norms, who have been pathologised by psychiatric and therapy frameworks, who have been experimented on, incarcerated and lobotomised, endured electroshock therapy, chemical and hormonal therapies. Who perhaps knew that the talking therapies and behavioural interventions they endured were part of a wider movement to eradicate their existence, alongside the force of police and legal systems that feared the disruptive power of the beautiful diversities they inhabited (Preciado, 2020). This eradication of trans and queer people, gender expansive people, and non-binary people under the guise of "mental health" and public order continues today where too many trans people die annually by their own or others' hands. Gender nonconformity brutally squeezed out of existence. These people are my ancestors, my *transcestors* (E-J Scott, 2018) if you will. They are the roots of my queer heritage, the lives lived before mine that shape and move me to write these words.



Credit: theythemstudio.com

Claiming my positionality, a white antipodean, cis, queer, dyslexic, systemic psychotherapist, I think it's especially important for us to decolonise the system of gender we have inherited and continue to perpetuate. Systemic psychotherapy has a history of bold epistemological shifts and I see it as vital that this is our very next one.

The key themes that unfold from here on are

- ancient wisdoms and new knowledges in gender
- chromonormativity
- mirrored rooms and disco balls
- recalibrating narratives of loss
- Reclaiming our braveness and depathologising our practice.



Credit: theythemstudio.com

Many of the images and some of the content in this paper originate from the project "More Adventures" (Middleton, Barker and Gregory, 2022), a therapeutic resource which supports expansive conversations about being trans and exploring gender. It uses trans history to examine the intersections of gender and sexuality, inviting conversations and thinking which can contribute to resilience building and to making a world that allows people to be the best versions of themselves.

"More Adventures" follows on from "Adventures in Time and Gender" (Barker et al., 2020), a project where young trans people worked with a team set up by the Rethinking Sexology team at Exeter University to investigate western trans history. The resulting play, written collaboratively with Jason Barker, became a podcast due to Covid-19 and can be accessed on the website.

### **Chrononormativity**

I find myself talking about time a lot. Time as it relates to context and so in turn creates the possibilities for who we can be. The "Adventures in Time and Gender" project used the possibility of time travel to illuminate how ideas about gender and sexuality have evolved in western sexology, showing how trans and queer identities have become unnecessarily medicalised and pathologised today.



Time as it structures our existence is steeped in normativity. There are so many presuppositions about when it's the "right" and "wrong" time to do something or not. Cultural norms that tell us what ages bring about what possibilities and what ages shut down those possibilities. This is particularly alive for young trans people right now who are being told they are too early, too soon, or too quick in their knowing of themselves.

The regulation of time works to control what is possible for us to experience and when and how to understand that experience as "normal" or not (Freeman, 2010). The family life cycle (Carter and McGoldrick, 1998) might be considered an artefact of chronormativity, positing as it does a very particular rhythm through which family life "should" pass.

Queer and trans people do time differently and yet are still measured by the cisnormative and heteronormative expectations of time. How we understand time is linked to how we understand gender and what possibilities we will allow for its expansion. At the same time, gender is always moving, just as time does.

How do your ideas about the "right time" to do something shape your ideas about what is right for trans people? If we try to untether ourselves from the normativities of time and the way it seeks to control our experiences, what new ways of supporting trans people, especially trans children, emerge?



Credit: theythemstudio.com

## Gender Binary System

Despite our social constructionist framework, the field of systemic psychotherapy rarely questions the supposed universality of the binary gender system. Most often, we fall into line with the dominant status quo orientating ourselves to and reproducing the binary gendered system that we have inherited and been indoctrinated in. This system, or as trans philosopher Paul Preciado terms it, "epistemological regime" (2021, p. 45,) conceives truths that feel unquestionable to many. That there are two sexes, and two sexes only, these are determined by biology, and are signified by differences in genitals, which bring about differences in the productive and reproductive functions of the sexual organs. That males become men, have penises and perform masculinity. That females become women, have vulvas, and perform femininity. Binary gender as a truth communicates that this *is* the order of things. It is just the way things are, and anything that deviates from it is, well, deviant.

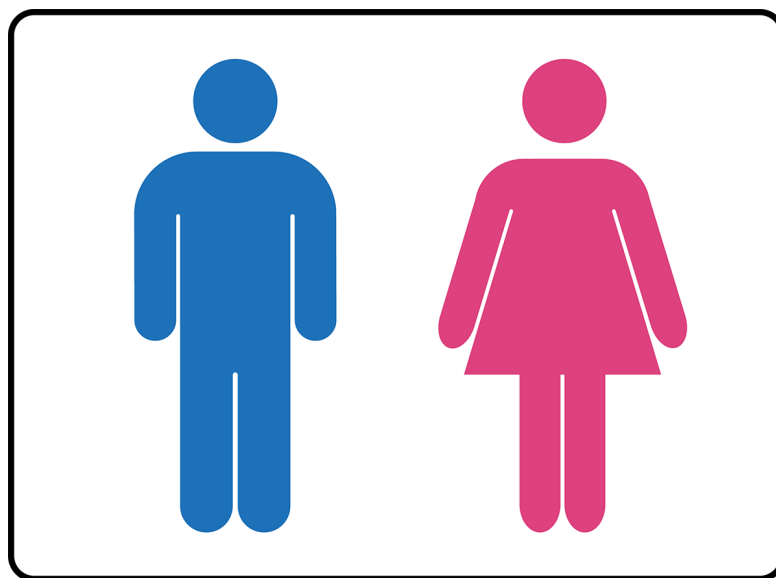
I invite you to think about how we came to have this system and the political and economic order that it produces and legitimatises, the heterocolonial patriarchy (Preciado, 2013). Far from being a truth, the system of binary gender is a blunt and violent instrument of colonialism, that is embedded in our

institutions, discourses, conventions, and cultural agreements. So embedded that we experience it as making up the very substance of our personhood.

We know now that binary gender is a system rather than a truth because of the many ways of understanding and inhabiting gender that exist outside the white European frame. We can also trace the origins of the two-gender system gaining prominence in Europe and becoming the dominant way of understanding gender only as recently as the late 18<sup>th</sup> century.

“Contemporary historians of the science and society of the Renaissance now agree that until the Middle Ages and perhaps as late as the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, the dominant western epistemology was the “one sex model” in which only the male body was recognized as anatomically perfect.”

(Preciado, 2021, p. 47)



Before the 19<sup>th</sup> century “woman” didn’t exist as an either an anatomical or political subject. And although still at a hierarchical disadvantage during these times, the universalisation of the one sex model could have been used to allow women’s access to political life. Instead, the two-sex model based on the naturalisation of sexual difference, and a system of “oppositions” between the sexes emerges. With it came the story that men are productive and public beings and women are reproductive and domestic beings. Basically, men are from Mars and women are from Venus justified by the shape and characteristics of their genitals and institutionalised by legal, social and political systems. The distinction of heterosexual as normal and superior, and homosexual as abnormal and inferior also emerged.

Later in the 1940s, huge advances in chromosomal and endocrinological techniques alongside the increased medicalisation of birth led to increasing numbers of babies being classified as what we now call intersex, showing via biology the fallacy of the two-sex system. John Money invented the concept of “gender identity” (Ehrhardt, 2007) and developed dubious therapeutic techniques and led a clinic that performed forced sex reassignment surgeries on intersex infants who were obviously unable to consent (Morland et al., 2014). He was lauded a hero by the medical and psychiatric establishment of

the time for his claims he could successfully reassign gender in unwitting and unknowing babies and children. His most high-profile case study, David Reimer, ended his own life at age 38, after a lifetime of mental health struggles. John Money's medical and therapeutic interventions implicated in this struggle (Copapinto, 2000). For the next 40 years, intersex people were hidden from view via secretive and invasive medical practices and protocols. There are now more than 30 intersex variations and around 1 in every 1500 live births are of intersex people (Fausto-Sterling, 2012).

I could go on here about the practices of the medical and psychological fields that have sought to silence, ignore, cure and disappear queerness, gender nonconformity and transness since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the biological sciences and psychoanalysis developed interest in sexual and gender normativity. Instead, contributing to and in many ways creating, the dominance of the idea that biological sex is immutable and there are just two genders. As our history is learnt and told, as intersex and trans people find each other and build community, as they speak and advocate for themselves, as psychotherapists come to deconstruct the categories of woman and man, the gender binary comes more sharply into focus as a problematic system.

Many people find themselves living within the contradiction of being immersed in the gender binary whilst simultaneously witnessing and participating in its crumbling. The totalitarian regime of sex and gender as binary truths is unravelling. Many of us are part of this shifting paradigm. It is exciting and scary with many of us bearing witness to it in ourselves, in our families, in our communities and in our therapy practices.

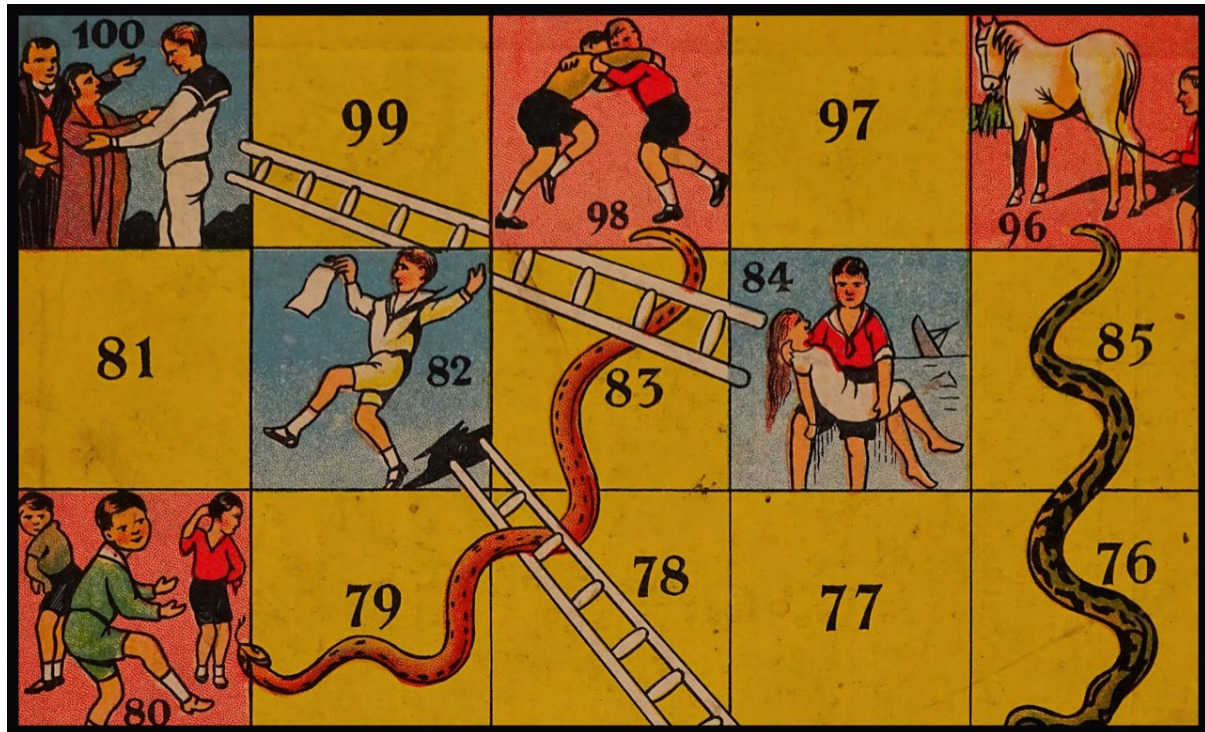
In this new unfolding paradigm, the term "biological sex" is able to encompass all the variations that exist. Intersex people become humanised through the dissolving of pathologising discourses. Sexuality becomes a broadening of possibilities. A pan sexuality that is fluid and free from the trappings of deviance, sin, inversion and abnormality. Gender becomes liberated from dualism. It severs its attachment to genitals as a truth about who you are and who you are allowed to become. Liberated from the controlling monoliths of femininity and masculinity, gender feels freer. Trans bodies become free. They become their own sovereign states and so are decolonised from the heteropatriarchal regime that has sought to control at best, annihilate at worst.

### **Snakes and ladders and playgrounds**

Currently, in many places, gender looks a lot like a game of snakes and ladders, your status and social power advances the more ladders of heteronormativity manage to climb. Snakes, the choices and moments where queerness and gender non-conformity prevail take you backwards. The more snakes you slide down the less humanness you are entitled to occupy. In other places, gender is becoming a playground. Playgrounds are contexts that allow for adventure and possibility, for a transformation of the "rules" (Bateson, 1972), for delight, for pleasure, and for this pleasure to be its own righteous form of activism (Brown, 2019). Kate Bornstein, trans theorist and dearest aunty says,

"When gender is a binary, it's a battlefield. When you get rid of the binary, gender becomes a playground. All kinds of ways of looking at gender can peacefully coexist. Of course, there are playground bullies. But whereas the activism of any kind of binary politic is struggle, and opposition, and gaining ground at the expense of someone else, the activism of a playground is cooperation and coalition."

(Drucker and Bornstein, 2017)



Credit: theythemstudio.com

How can we make our therapy spaces a playground for gender?

This shift to a new system of sex, gender and sexuality is inevitable, its already unfolding before us, being created in the moments between us. My hope is that we as a field can get on board, support and be part of a new system that allows for more space and more play. We have such pride in being the radical ones of the therapeutic field, perhaps this is the next radical move we need to make?

### **Ancient Systems of Gender**

Before 15<sup>th</sup> century colonisation practices, people and places existed with gender systems and codes that were outside the hierarchy of “man” and “woman” and the false naturalisation of a binary “male” and “female”. Indeed, these concepts followed from the dichotomous hierarchy of human and non-human as the central dichotomy of colonial modernity (Lugones, 2010, p. 743). Colonisers created hierarchies of who counted as human and nonhuman in order to gain control and so brought about binary logic as *the* central logic for our selfhoods and in turn, used binary white coloniser gender as a form of violence against the many non-binary gendered people and cultures that existed around the world.

I find it hard to present the many ways in which gender and biological sex work differently across indigenous and ancient cultures, as our current ways of seeing things obscure these delicate nonbinary wisdoms. I also run the risk of misrepresenting and poaching knowledge that is not mine to tell as a white antipodean woman. So, I will tread very gently here, reading descriptions from the Adventures project.

#### *Brotherboys and Sistergirls*

Brotherboys and Sistergirls are from the First Nation transgender community in Australia. Brotherboys



carry the masculine spirit although this doesn't mean they consider themselves men, rather those gender spirits are predominant within them.

The early terms differed from tribe to tribe but all tribes recognised transgender people and this has continued to grow and develop over time to become the modern-day Aboriginal community of Brotherboys and Sistergirls.

Australian First Nation culture was not based on the way the people look, nor on binary or heteronormative approaches to gender and today the Brotherboys and Sistergirls continue to push for recognition and equality to have the freedom to be who they are in modern Australia.

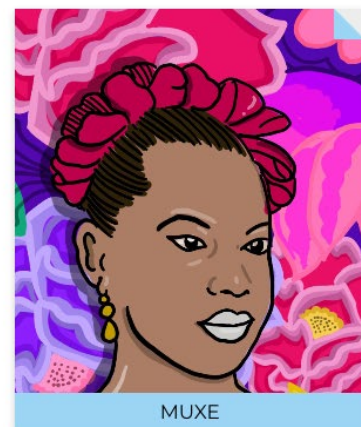
### *Bissu*

In Indonesia, one of the largest ethnicities in South Sulawesi, recognises five genders and has done for at least six centuries.

Bissu are people considered to transcend the binary, to be formed of all the characteristics of gender to form a new "meta-gender". Bissu are spiritual healers and celebrants. They perform complex rituals in which reverence for Allah is blended with shamanic trance, chanting and possession by spirits or deities. The contribution of Bissu to gender diversity in South Sulawesi is considered critical for ensuring balance and harmony for all in that society.

### *World genders by artist Soofiya*

Credit: Soofiya at soofiya.com



More world genders can be found at <https://adventuresintimeandgender.org/wormholes/world-genders>

Just a few other examples are

- Whakawahine in Māori communities
- Fa'a'fine from the Pacific, Samoa and Tonga.
- Wakashu (whack-a-shu) from Japan
- 2 spirit people of Indigenous Americas and Canada
- Muxe (moosh-say) from Mexico
- Metis from Nepal
- Mahu in Hawaii
- Sipiniq within Inuit communities

To even describe these people and knowledge as trans can be seen as a colonial act as the language of transgender is connected to European knowledge. To decolonise gender, we need to rid it of its binary structure and free ourselves from having been inducted into it. In the Handbook of Systemic Family Therapy, Heiden-Rootes and colleagues acknowledge that “the language of sexual and gender identity has undergone rapid and frequent changes in recent decades” (Heiden-Rootes et al., 2020, p. 124) and it sometimes feels like the tectonic plates of gender are moving and shifting beneath our feet, and yet foregrounding fluidity in gender expressions and sexualities is not new or modern. It is ancient and indigenous. Trans people have always existed. Gender has always been beyond the binary. The current culture that dehumanises trans and non-binary people has its roots in the colonial project to create non-human subjects, demonising anyone who operates outside the white man’s logic and using the gender binary as a tool to control and exploit.

### **Language and Mirror Balls**

More and more young people are rejecting the gender binary, identifying as between, beyond or something else entirely. Labels and language are proliferating with endless possibilities for being gendered. You can get an X instead of an F or M on your passport and birth certificate in some places, and 17 countries have written self-declaration of gender identity into law.

How in therapy do we use these ancient truths and the new wisdoms of gender that we experience each day in our families and alongside our clients? Especially when the therapy room is mirrored, as Hare-Mustin (1994) proposes, reflecting only the most dominant of discourses about what gender is and can be. Creating an echo chamber of limited possibilities and keeping us tethered to the history of pathologisation that has plagued our field and harmed the trans and gender expansive folks we have tried to serve or become. Therapy itself is an institution which reinforces notions of normality. Historically it has played a central part in the violent systems that reinforce and codify binary gender.

Mirrors, much like cameras, don’t reflect “truths”, contrary to the popular saying, the camera indeed always lies. A camera lens, a mirror, a reflection, these are always distortions. Just think about trying to take a good picture of a full moon on your smart phone; its magnificence never shows. Or the ways

in which film and cameras have reinforced racist biases, having been built to reflect white skin as the norm and darker skin tones needing special corrective care; cameras are a technology of subjective decisions and alter the way we see and know each other (Lewis, 2019).

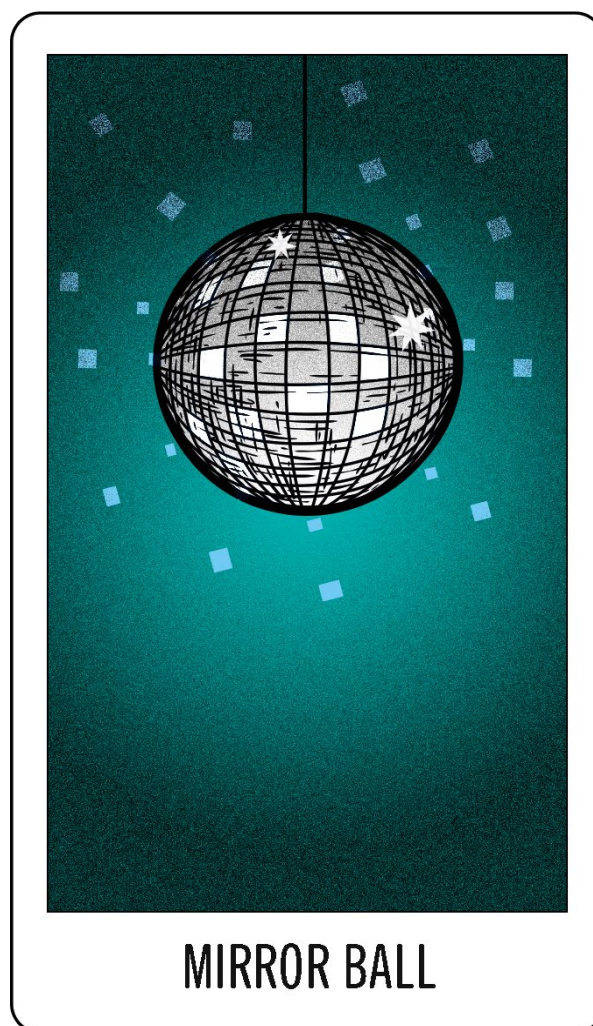
Much like a camera lens, the mirror is always telling us a distortion. It shows us power. In the mirrored room, therapy becomes a site for the production of white cis and hetero normative power. The therapy room, still firmly rooted to its clinic origin, reproduces the practices of discursive contagion (Simon, 2021b), growing particular discourses about health and normalcy whilst restricting others. Most therapists, as maverick as we imagine ourselves to be, are simply perpetuating the dominant morals of our time and culture. This is a huge problem when our media sources and most popular culture tells us that trans, nonbinary and gender nonconforming people are either rare, invisible, deviant or predatory (Faye, 2021).

To get under or around the mirrored room we need to ask how the institution of binary gender is being supported by current discourses about trans people?

How does demonising, thingifying, theorising, othering and dehumanising trans people serve to support dominant ideas about power? About what's right and wrong? About men and women? Who is invested in maintaining the current power structures created by this binary gendered system? These questions move the focus from trans people to the lens that shapes our view of transness. Lens made of gender essentialism, that feminist family therapists highlight, mask the relations of power.

Therapy, the clinic, and the "family" are accessories of binary gender. From the forms we complete, to the norms we perpetuate, to what we question and what we don't. Whose voice becomes the "truth" of sorts and whose is constantly questioned? Therapy offers a cis view of trans experience, and so colonises gendered possibilities with pathologising structures.

Trans people's possibilities for existing well, feeling steady, and finding new ways to be joyful are diminished by the mirrored room of therapy. While hoping to create conversations that offer freedom and transformation, ask questions that promote healing and a sturdiness in wellbeing, mostly therapists offer the repetition of the dominant discourses of our time. Discourses that reify the logic of cisgenderism (Ansara and Hegarty, 2012), that "ideology (system of thought and action) that invalidates peoples own understanding of their genders and bodies" (Ansara, 2018, p. 24).



Credit: theythemstudio.com

These discourses produce experiences like: wondering and/or asking if someone is REALLY trans? With REALLY in the kind of capital letters that signify the seeking of truth, fixity and stability and trans written and spoken as a known and definable category. Using the binary book ends of masculinity and femininity to assess how within the “norms” of gender a person is, in order to define how acceptable their gender is. Using the notion of linear time and consistency to evaluate some ones trans identity with questions like, when did you first want to transition? When did you *know* you were trans? As if certain histories offer more or less validity and sharper clarity in the mirrored room.

Subordinate discourses get lost and excluded, and along with them so much possibility for what they might create if they were conjured in therapy. As a profession, therapists need to be asking where the narratives they use about trans people come from? Where are trans people in the creation of the stories held and told about them? Where are the trans, gender expansive and queer family and systemic therapists? How is space being made for their visibility and participation in our field? How can conversations between systemic therapists and trans, queer and gender expansive people happen without reflecting the pathologising history of sexology and current media narratives?

How is conversation invited and co-produced so that it may make meaning beyond the binary? If the therapy room is made of mirrors that reflect power, how does the monolith of the mirror get dismantled? Perhaps more fragmentation is needed? Should the mirror be smashed? Broken into tiny pieces and fashioned into a ball, allowing the reflections to curve and refract, to bounce with light.

The mirror ball is a symbol of queerness, resistance, joy and pleasure. Creating a mirror ball room may bring the kind of trans celebratory discourse required to undo the dominance of cisnormativity in therapeutic talk.

Mirror balls are first recorded as showing up in the night clubs of Germany in the roaring 1920s, a time of great permissiveness and experimentation with gender and sexuality. Mirror balls fragment the light, just as we need to fragment discourses. Letting in the little ones that move and dazzle.

If the mirrored room has a mirror ball, no one story can be that large, instead dominant discourses become diminished, each fragment offers the possibility for unique and local telling's of selfhood, sexuality and gender. Each fragment moves and spins, blurring truths and creating joy from the flux, the movement, the not pinning down. The room can become filled with trans knowledge, alternative ways of inhabiting queer and trans joy, alternative ways of living gender. These alternative knowledges are likely useful not just for trans people, but for everybody.

To bring in the mirror ball we must leave the therapy room, this is vital, seeking out alternative discourses by engaging with queer and trans communities, queer and trans histories, and queer and trans stories. The everyday life of queer and trans people utilised to produce insider knowledges, through an exoticising of the domestic (Epston, 2014). Therapy might do well to centre the everydayness of gender nonconformity and gender expansiveness rather than the story of “difference” as it created by the power relations of the mirrored room. By installing a mirror ball, we can deconstruct where our stories about trans people come from, who they are in service to and why.

Finding alternative ways of viewing and experiencing gender will require leaving the mirrored room. It is the responsibility of an ethical therapist to seek information beyond what is handed to them by those with power. Growing ethically as a field will require seeking out alternative knowledge's and encouraging colleges to move beyond the traditional confines of knowledge. Reconnecting to the



spirit of how systemic thinking has explored new paradigms and sought out alternative understandings in the face unsatisfactory knowledges and unjust power stories.

### Questions to Guide New Explorations

You might ask these questions of yourself, and I dearly hope we ask them of each other.

- What are you already doing to install a mirror ball in your therapy practice, what do you want to do more of?
- How do we invite each other into keeping aware of the damaging effects of the gender binary and the narrowing it creates in possibilities for being gendered?
- How do you stay accountable for your part in a system which has historically and currently pathologises queer, trans and gender creative folks?
- What expansion of systemic tools is needed to do well by trans, queer and gender questioning folks in therapy?
- What will it take to decolonise gender across systemic psychotherapy?

By changing the binary, heteronormative, cisnormative, monogamy-focused language in work with clients, what new ways of talking about gender, sexuality, and relationships will emerge? What will we potentially learn about our clients, and ourselves, if we make these changes? (Heiden-Rootes, Addison and Pettinelli, 2020). What adventures might emerge as we find ways to release ourselves from what has gone before?

### Loss and homelessness

In therapeutic work trans people's experiences are often saturated in themes of grief and loss. Parents are expected to grieve the loss of the child they had before "coming out". Partners are encouraged to explore the loss of the couple's identity before transition. Worries about the loss of reproductive function can dominate conversations about young people transitioning. "Regret" narratives are tied to the cultural horror of losing cis privilege in identity, experience and bodily aesthetics. These themes echo the persistent favouring of cisgendered discourse in clinical work.

Julie Tilsen (2021) talks about how parental loss narratives particularly play into anti-trans rhetoric by classifying transness as a somehow unnatural and undesired state of being. Supporting the notion that being cisgender is a preferred and ideal way of being human and being trans is a less good way of being human. These narratives also reinforce the idea that families have ownership over children's identities and invite practitioners into being unwitting advocates for cisnormativity (Tilsen, 2021).

Researching parents' experiences of a child's social transition, Bull and D'Arrigo-Patrick, found that parents make meaning of their child's transgender identity in the context of the powerful cultural value of gender conformity which fuels the loss discourse in a reinforcing loop (2018). Looking forward, the impact on people's future lives and family relationships if they are invited into the domain of grief and loss rather than one of freedom and transformation needs to be considered urgently.



Credit: theythemstudio.com

Psychologist Susan David described grief as “love looking for its home” on a podcast I was listening to by Brené Brown (Brown and David, 2021) at a time when discourses of trans loss were very alive in my work with trans people and their families. This way of defining grief stuck with me and got me wondering if what parents experience when their child comes out is a sort of relational homelessness rather than a loss. The space between us is undoubtedly shaped by gender. Gender is part of the mould that forms the shape of how we love each other.

When someone “comes out” as trans, nonbinary or gender expansive, they let us into a precious knowing of themselves. This process is better seen as a “coming in” (Hammoud-Beckett, 2007, p. 32) an invitation to be in their club of life (White, 2000) rather than an announcement of “difference”. This “coming in” is an invitation reshape the relational space that holds love for one another. How gender has bought shape to the love between parent and child needs to shift and reform. This shifting could be experienced as a temporal and relational homelessness.

Without the walls of gender conformity, the furniture of cis to cis relating and the fixtures of heterosexual expectation, love feels uprooted. The process of relocating love to its new gendered terms, shapes and comforts can bring a new foundation to parent child relationships. By centring trans, non-binary and gender expansive experience in these conversations, narratives of joy, discovery and freedom are included, changing the conversation and in turn the possible shape of family relationships. Discourses that include the magic of transformation, love shaped and lived beyond gender conformity and celebration of trans identities are to be welcomed in therapy.

## Ending

The systemic field has a history of being brave in embracing complexity, multiplicity and trying to hold paradoxes in subjectivity. Long standing tools in social constructionism and post structuralism, and newer ideas from new materialism and post-humanism stand us in good stead. However, historically the pervasiveness of the gender binary system has led systemic psychotherapists away from applying their most useful tools where they are needed most. The notion of biological sex has escaped deconstruction and become a pervasive game of truth (Foucault, 2003) in our field. There is urgency now in the need to unpick and examine categories like woman, and man, transgender, male and female uncovering how they remain in service to colonial discourses of pathology.

I sometimes imagine trans communities gathering to interview various therapeutic modalities to see who might best suit their needs for support, helpful conversations, and dissolving the pathologising problem talk that surrounds them. I see the systemic modality as capable of giving a fairly good interview. The field has a history and a set of skills to place them/us as nearly ideal candidates for this important work. Yet if systemic psychotherapy got this imaginary job its therapists and practitioners would still require a great deal of induction training. Training that addresses the tendrils of pathologisation in our talk and helps us to be accountable for our historic harmful practices. Training that allows us to illuminate the invisible, holding up to the light the binary system of gender and how it operates to reinforce colonial power structures that failed to serve us all. “Old wisdom needs to be carried forward with braveness” (Halliwell, 2022), and I trust new truths will emerge from our mirror balled room.

## References

- Ansara, Y. Gavriel (2018). “What’s fabulous about being non-binary?” Non-cisgenderist clinical responses to systemic trauma. In (Eds.) Middleton, Amanda & Iantaffi, Alex. *Context: Working Systemically with trans, non-binary and gender expansive people*, 155, 24-27.
- Ansara, Y. Gavriel & Hegarty, Peter (2012). Cisgenderism in Psychology: pathologizing and misgendering children from 1999 to 2008. *Psychology & Sexuality*, 3(2), 137-160.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/19419899.2011.576696>
- Barker, Jason; Gendered Intelligence & The Rethinking Sexology and Transformations Team at the University of Exeter and the University of Portsmouth (2020). *Adventures in Time and Gender*.  
<https://adventuresintimeandgender.org/>
- Bateson, Gregory (1972). Theory of Play and Fantasy. In *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution and Epistemology*. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson.
- Bull, Brooke & D’Arrigo-Patrick, Justine (2018). Parent Experiences of a Child Social transition: Moving beyond the loss narrative. *The Journal of Feminist Family Therapy*, 30(3), 170-190.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/08952833.2018.1448965>
- Brown, Adrienne Maree (2019). *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good*. Chico, CA: AK Press.
- Brown, Brené & David, Susan (2021). The Dangers of Toxic Positivity. <https://brenebrown.com/podcast/brene-with-dr-susan-david-on-the-dangers-of-toxic-positivity-part-1-of-2/>
- Carter, Betty & McGoldrick, Monica, (1998). *The Expanded Family Life Cycle: Individual, Family and Social Perspectives*. New York: Pearson.
- Coates, Linda & Wade, Allan (2007). Language and Violence: Analysis of Four Discursive Operations, *Journal of Family Violence*, 22(7), 511-522. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10896-007-9082-2>
- Colapinto, John (2000). *As nature made him: The boy who was raised as a girl*. London: HarperCollins.
- Drucker, Zackary & Bornstein, Kate (2017). Gender Is a Playground. <https://aperture.org/editorial/gender-playground>
- Ehrhardt, Anke A. (2007). John Money Ph.D. In Memoriam. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 44(3), 223-224.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00224490701580741>
- Epston, David (2014). Ethnography, co-research and insider knowledges. *The International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*. 35(1), 65-68. <https://doi.org/10.1002/anzf.1048>
- Fausto-Sterling, Anne (2012). *Sex/Gender: Biology in a Social World*. London: Routledge.

- Faye, Shon (2021). *The Transgender Issue: An Argument for Justice*. London: Penguin Random House.
- Foucault, Michel (2003). The ethics of the concern of the self as a practice of freedom. In P. Rabinow, & N. Rose (Eds.), *The Essential Foucault* (pp. 25-43). New York: The News Press.
- Fielding, Lucie (2021). *Trans Sex: Clinical approaches to trans sexualities and erotic embodiments*. New York: Routledge.
- Freeman, Elizabeth (2010). *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Halliwell, Carol (2022). Personal communication.
- Hammoud-Beckett, Sekneh (2007). Azima ila Hayati – An invitation to my life: Narrative conversations about sexual identity. *The International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, 1, 29-39.
- Hare-Mustin, Rachel, (1994). Discourses in the Mirrored Room: A postmodern analysis of therapy. *Family Process*, 33(1), 19-35. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1545-5300.1994.00019.x>
- Heiden-Rootes, Katie; Addison, Sheila & Pettinelli, J. Douglas, (2020). Working with Queer Couples. In Wampler, Karen, & Blow, Adrian (Eds.), *The Handbook of Systemic Family Therapy*, Vol. 3, 123-153. London: John Wiley & Sons Ltd.
- Lewis, Sarah, (2019). The Racial Bias Built into Photography. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/25/lens/sarah-lewis-racial-bias-photography.html>
- Lugones, Maria (1994). Purity, Impurity, and Separation. *Signs*, 22(2), 458-479.
- Lugones, Maria (2010). Towards a Decolonial Feminism. *Hypatia*, 25(4), 742-759.
- Middleton, Amanda; Barker, Jason & Gregory, Zed (2021). *Adventures in Time and Gender*. <https://adventuresintimeandgender.org/more-adventures/>
- Middleton, Amanda., Barker, Jason & Gregory, Zed (2022) *More Adventures*. <https://adventuresintimeandgender.org/more-adventures>
- Morland, Iain; Downing, Lisa, & Sullivan, Nikki (2014). *Fuckology: Critical essays on John Money's Diagnostic concepts*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Preciado, Paul (2013). *Testo Junkie. Sex, drugs and the Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era*. New York: Feminist Press.
- Preciado, Paul (2021). *Can the Monster Speak?* London: Fitzcarraldo Editions.
- Roache, Juno (2020). *Trans Power: Own Your Gender*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Reynolds, Vikki (2010). Fluid and Imperfect Ally Positioning: Some Gifts of Queer Theory. *Context*. October 2010, 13-17. Association for Family and Systemic Therapy, UK.
- Scott, E. J. (2018). Personal communication.
- Simon, Gail (2021a). Panmorphic Crisis: Cultural Rupture and Systemic Change. *Murmurations: Journal of Transformative Systemic Practice*, 4(1), 87–101. <https://doi.org/10.28963/4.1.7>
- Simon, Gail (2021b). *The End of the Clinic*. Presentation to Association of Family Therapy Annual Conference, 24<sup>th</sup> September 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qRtwjLy0R-g>
- Tilsen, Julie (2021). *Queering Your therapy Practice. Queer Theory, Narrative Therapy and Imagining New Identities*. New York: Routledge.
- White, Michael (2000). Reflecting-team work as definitional ceremony revisited. In M. White, *Reflections on narrative practice: Essays & interviews*, 59-85. Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications.



## Author

**Amanda Middleton**, MSc, is a systemic and family psychotherapist, supervisor and trainer who adores attending to the themes of queerness, love and transformation in therapy. She works at The Pink Practice, Gendered Intelligence and offers teaching and training in systemic spaces across the UK.

E-mail: [amanda@pinkpractice.co.uk](mailto:amanda@pinkpractice.co.uk)

URL: [www.amandamiddleton.com](http://www.amandamiddleton.com)

## Citation

Middleton, Amanda (2022). Adventures in time, gender and therapeutic practice. Embracing a queer systemic way of working with gender expansive families. *Murmurations: Journal of Transformative Systemic Practice*, 5(2), 28-44. <https://doi.org/10.28963/5.2.4>