

Can you see me beyond the binary? Three poems and three invitations

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Abstract

These three poems sought to navigate and share my experiences as a non-binary person within two institutions at different time points. The first two were written to the same educational institution several months apart, with the second coming in the wake of the April 2025 UK Supreme Court ruling. The third was written during a hospital admission one month on from the same ruling, a changing and cold landscape of care that felt increasingly unsafe for a gender diverse person in this moment in time. I am a human being; I am fully living in existing beyond the binary. I'm asking you to see me, and look at the world with me in these words to understand an othered experience (Shotter, 2009). So many conversations are happening about gender diverse people without us, for to converse with me, I'm asking you to look beyond the binary. In this way, I'm seeking to engage you in "being" with me on the path to "becoming", or growing together mutually, as I ask you to engage with our collective humanity. I hope by unusually asking you to move from the witnessing position in reading my words, to the active position of contending with different forms of questioning, that you might sense that mutual growing together and coming into action (Andersen, 2012). These questions invite you to take multiple perspectives, and I'm interested in what happens within you as this sharing happens to us both. What new ways of thinking, values, endings, or beginnings enter your mind if any? In my experience working with allies, our best work is done in equal parts, while I am and I exist, and I'm sharing this with you, I ask that you actively engage with me too.

Poem 1

“Please Read”

“I don’t think that we end homophobia and transphobia by educating people. I think we end homophobia and transphobia by making people feel.”

Alok Vaid-Menon (they/them)

This poem was written with a memory from several months earlier rolling through my mind, that of induction week and a nod by those in power of the dangers of cisheteronormativity. In that moment, I felt like I could put down my shield, “maybe I don’t need to defend my existence here, maybe I could just...be?” This memory made way for a gradual process of lifting the shield again, as misgendering happened by those in power and by colleagues, lecturers presented cisheteronormative references and case discussions. What is often forgotten is the erasure of gender diverse people historically and currently, that a lack of representation intertwines with transgenerational grief. When you are the only one in the room, as I was, I sat with the profound sadness of wondering how you can exist in a space that doesn’t speak of you. I’m reminded that the same existence that fills me with a joy I’ve never felt so intensely, is what others may describe as political or assume dysphoria. I wondered, “what other identity can only exist if systems, institutions or individuals continue to perceive it as conditional to their judgement?” The answer, I believe, is every intersectional experience, which renders our existences as collectively and inherently necessary.

“Please read” - Dear lecturers,

I hope through this poem, that you can begin to know
That things have happened that aren’t ok, and cracks are starting to show,
Misgendering, being positioned as educator, and an absence of representation,
It’s time we talked about the prevalence of cisheteronormativity, and have a conversation.

With each lecture passing, I am the only gender diversity I see
Yet in the induction, you talked about cisheteronormativity,
I felt hope, that I could be seen among a sea of gender diversity,
Instead, I’m fighting the urge to withdraw to the shadows of this university.

I’ve been trying to weave in LGBTQ+ history and experiences through spoken word,
Filling in the gap within each lecture, fighting off the fear of feeling unheard,
Knowing the pain of silence, when allies are frozen by their own fear,
I’m here in front of you, asking for you to hear.

Gender diverse voices matter, so does sexuality,
It not just about the differences between you and me,
The difference widens the gap, soon enough I’m dehumanised
A distant concept, for society and others, to be pathologised.

If I cannot see myself reflected and only see the binary,
 I really do feel as though you have lied to me,
 You uttered the words “cisheteronormativity” all those weeks ago,
 I’m sure you would never do this intentionally, so now I hope you know.

That for me, you haven’t shown up, you haven’t touched the sides,
 Off all the beauty of LGBTQ-ness that doesn’t exist in your slides,
 My heart aches for my younger self, that never knew I could feel so much euphoria,
 But you’ll never hear about this when there is such a gap, you just see “dysphoria.”

I’m carrying the burden that you’ve left behind since you said,
 “Cisheteronormativity is a problem,” while being complicit in how its spread
 Spread in our lectures, erasing us again, leaving me to be the voice,
 Either I’m silent and protect myself, or I make that non-neutral choice...

Of being the only one weaving in LGBTQ+ trailblazers and history,
 Sitting with the darkness of our erasure, and existence as resistance,
 Talk with no action is not allyship, it means that you’ll never see all of me,
 While I fill in the gap, you’ll never get to hear about the joy in my existence.

I’m getting tired and fatigued in filling in the gaps you’re leaving behind,
 Academically, I’m doing fine but consistently positioned in a way that isn’t kind,
 When just existing as gender diverse in world takes courage just to be,
 I don’t know how you can’t see that you are complicit in erasing me.
 So, what now? Think about your slides and cisheteronormativity,
 So all of us queer trainees can know the joy of “seeing me.”
 Think about your relationship to the binary and try to be brave,
 Fear can be paralysing; I need you to hear us all and meet me on this stage.

My questions to you, the reader:

“Where did my words take you?”

“If you were in a position of power in this institution, how would you use it? And how would I know if you did?”

“Do you recognise “the joy of seeing me,” that moment when you have seen yourself reflected in others or spaces?”

“Where is joy welcome, and who could help with joy returning to the educational space?”

“If you were me, what would tell you that you were safe or able to relax in this context?”

Poem 2

“I'm holding pieces of my heart in my hands and you're nowhere to be seen”

“There are many things oppression and its side effects rid you of, and one of them, I believe, is an easier access to your truth: if it is so regularly questioned, sometimes it proves harder to find when no one is around”

Travis Alabanza (*they/them*).

Following the UK Supreme Court ruling, which took place in April 2025, my return to this institution was particularly challenging. The impact of this ruling tore through the gender diverse community, impacting transwomen, but also transmen. While non-binary and intersex folk are left to wonder exactly how and where we fit in a binary system. That familiar question emerges again “do I exist to them?”

Relational responsibility surfaces as I wonder about all the actions I've taken to be seen, to speak when silencing myself is what it feels that systems of oppression are seeking. I wonder where the line lies for gender diverse people between what we pick up, and what we can put down for an ally to carry. I've been many colleagues' first experience of a gender diverse person, but am I responsible for their education, their approval or disapproval, or in guiding them to fight for us? At this moment, I realise I'm not responsible for many things I've picked up in the hopes of being seen, and I'm tired. Multiple pronoun pins purchased, coming out continuously to new people, trying to be brave with new lecturers by introducing my pronouns and hoping this might mean protection. I cannot guarantee my own protection from harm because this is contingent on someone's ability to see me, store this information, and call upon it when they engage with me, in addition to their general to-do lists and responsibilities. I need being seen to mean something to you, as it means everything to me. If you see all of me, you share in the joy I feel not just in this moment but all the years and iterations of me that led to this moment. Joy and euphoria, love and being valued are not ways that we always get to see ourselves represented when we think about media exposure, recently it has felt quite the opposite. We find these emotions of joy and euphoria among ourselves, our communities, within our histories like a tapestry that we weave in, connect to and continue the thread our LGBTQ+ ancestors put down, it feels sacred and embodied. While it is such a beautiful thread to weave, I wonder what a society would look like if we were protected and represented, and what might the tapestry that never ends look like then?

A gender-neutral toilet sign had been taken down, one of very few available, and the silence from those in power was deafening while other establishments were positioning themselves. The misgendering continued, the air continued to leave the room as I call to mind the impacts of minority stress theory, it can feel like suffocation through positioning without choice. When you are the only one in a space, and recent political movements strip back rights of a community you belong to, hiding in the shadows in exposing spaces can feel quite inviting but never truly an option. I couldn't hide my grief, our collective grief that I was grieving only in gender diverse spaces, but I couldn't grieve in this context. How quickly marginalised identities can be disconnected from joy, that meaningful *witness* and collective growth that we deserve to experience too, but we're bracing in the face of uncertain harm.

“I’m holding pieces of my heart in my hands and you’re nowhere to be seen...”

I remember the first time I heard that beautiful quote about empathy.
About sending out echoes from your heart and waiting for them to be returned to you.
Since the Supreme Court ruling, I’ve been holding together pieces of my heart and me.
And with my hands full I look at you and wonder if it’s something you’ve given any thought to.

I’ve noticed the leaves shifting in the wind, the sun shining brightly in the sky.
While the grips of grief and a profound weight of pain pulls me back into abyss.
The world is moving around me, life goes on, while I’m holding myself not to cry.
I sit with my trans+ friends and queer family with the sense of safety we deeply miss.

A sense of safety we’ve collectively held closely, albeit only scraps of it,
Our history patchy from erasure, and a future full of uncertainty,
It’s being talked about and not talked to, and feeling like you’re complicit,
I’m holding these pieces of my heart, while explaining to you how you can support me.

I hear life moving on in the wind and feel the weight of the pieces of my heart in my hands.
I’ve been waiting for more safety as a refuge, to help me glue the pieces back together,
Have you ever known a hatred of your existence with so many successful rebrands?
This hate isn’t new to me; it shapeshifts in the shadows while I look at you and say, “it’s now or never.”

When will our pain be enough for you to truly see me as worthy of protecting?
When will you meet me with humanity and hold space for me like I’ve been needing?
On Thursday, the gender-neutral toilet sign was nowhere to be seen.
Those small spaces left for people like me are becoming far too lean.

I was misgendered in our lecture room Thursday and Friday with no space to hide the pain.
I can look at you and hold so much empathy, but it’s like you don’t know my name.
I’m here sat in front of you; how can you not think I might need to hear something kind?
From echoing the wider University statement to saying, “we’re holding your community in mind”?

I never thought existing on campus would feel so hard.
That wounds could be picked at any time, unprotected and scarred.
I’m working hard to put myself in LGBTQ spaces that hold me without analysis.
All these statements coming out, but your silence transports me back to the abyss.

I've been immersing myself in safe spaces to offset lecture days,
 Where I don't know if I'm safe, while other students enjoy the sun rays,
 I sat there this week, with those pieces of my heart in my hands, in a daze,
 A daze of grief and longing for a kind of protection and safety that stays.

You have all the skills that you need already to show up for me and trans+ trainees,
 It's the inaction, silence and lack of thought that brings me down to my knees,
 How much more do I need to see before I give up and relieve you of the responsibility?
 You seem to hold others in mind easily, but can't see or sit with these pieces of me?

I never wanted analysis, intellectualising or pathologising that doesn't tell me where you stand.

All I've wanted is to hear "I see you," "I'll stand beside you, those pieces look heavy, put some in my hand."

I'm existing in a painful world, with grief like a shadow and the light of hope on low beam.
 I need you to stand beside me, hold these pieces with me, but you're nowhere to be seen.

My questions to you, the reader:

"Is there a story of resistance here?"

"What actions might your emotions suggest you take after reading this?"

"How would you ask others to be with me for grief to be held among us rather than within me?"

"What might you say to a client who only feels safe within their community? And how do you build connection with them as an ally or outsider?"

"What personal or professional knowledge has helped you engage with pain or grief?"

Poem 3

"Hospitals and resistance"

"Most of my work has been with trans clients over the last seven years and the majority of people I speak to don't come to therapy to question or figure out their identity...most of the distress I see with my clients is around them trying to figure out how to explore/express their gender without being disowned, attacked or expelled to the margins of society; it is preparation for hard conversations, and exploring very legitimate fears around losing relationships, employment, medical care and, more broadly, safety."

Ellis J. Johnson (he/him)

I wrote this poem after being admitted to hospital for several days almost one month after the Supreme Court ruling, this was the last place I wanted to be. I noticed the absence of questions around gender identity as compared to previous visits, instead I was asked "what is your sex assigned at birth?" Coming out to institutions holds risk, particularly following the recent "New Clause 21"

addition to the proposed Data Access bill which a conservative MP attempted to pass shortly after the Supreme Court ruling. This prospective bill attempted to compel public institutions to collect data on gender diverse people but categorise only by sex assigned at birth meaning all correspondence would be received in this way. While this bill was defeated, it was my hospital experience. It presents an interesting but familiar quandary, do I come out to them, and they store this information in a harmful way, or do I closet myself and experience familiar, more predictable harm instead? This quandary of whether safety and authenticity can co-exist has haunted the LGBTQ+ community for centuries and is unpacked beautifully by Ellis J. Johnson and Jane Chance Czynszelska (they/she) in *Queering Psychotherapy* (2022).

I deeply struggled with how I felt in hospital, and I knew if I played the role of “good patient” that I would be able to get out of there. It is a surreal and alarming position to hold, that of wanting to get well enough to get out while knowing this is intended to be a place of care. It can feel very conflicting, existing as a non-binary person and working within an institution that holds unclear, mixed, and historical ties with oppression. I understand why there aren’t many gender diverse clinicians, in the same breath as I grieve for the representation.

This poem differs from the two above, as through this experience I felt more grounded in my gender non-conformity than ever. No branding as female through wristbands or jokes or cisheteronormativity in whatever form, could dislodge who I am. I wanted to speak to joy, resistance and survival stories, as I acknowledge these can be learnt from as well as pain. The joy and ancestral connections I speak to here, felt like connecting into that older collective tapestry of voices of resistance that I hope that hold me for the rest of my life.

Hospitals and resistance

I’m laying in a hospital bed and I’m felling empty,
 There’s a vital part of me here that you can’t seem to see,
 I’m here, I need care, and I’m non-binary,
 I don’t want special treatment; I just want you to know all of me.

Name, date and sex assigned at birth,
 Are these really the things that constitute our worth?
 You put wristbands on me with “female” like I’ve been branded,
 You no longer ask about gender identity; don’t you think this is heavy handed?

I wish you knew the joy of living as I am,
 That 9-year-old me would absolutely be a fan,
 We’ve had gendered norms imprinted on us since we we’ve been born,
 Today I’m whole but you’re the bully who wants to see me torn.

I heard “lady parts” and gendered jokes while I had my MRI,
 I wondered how hard it would be for you to look me in the eye,
 Imposing colonialism by cis female beauty standards only hurts you more,
 Because I’m not dressing or existing for anyone’s joy but my own anymore,

You're only harming other women, and I wish you could just see,
That the cishet white patriarchy is to blame and not people like me.

I'm harmed but I don't blame the staff who took care of me,
I blame the people at the top who hide behind austerity,
Fascism takes many forms and like a weed it grows,
We'll never be erased, this is something history shows.

I think about LGBTQ+ history in these times,
How our existed persisted, no matter the fines,
The will to love and live outweighs the ignorance,
We don't need you to tell us our lives hold significance,
Over centuries they walked against water so today we could tread,
I'll tread with hope in my heart so the next generations can walk freely instead.

So, while you dehumanise me and try to shrink me,
I will expand back with the love of the queer community,
I'll think about our history, and the beautiful people I've yet to meet,
While I'll heal and love radically, you're chained by your feet,
You think you have the power, but you're chained by your own mind,
You'll never know an expansive world, where norms don't define your kind.

I can hold grief and hope in each hand,
I can still feel joy despite the wristband,
You'll never shrink me or this community,
I hope your heart isn't full of hate for eternity.

My final questions for you

"If emotions are house guests, who showed up for this poem who wasn't there for the others?"

"How might your own stories or survival thicken mine if they were in dialogue?"

"If I were your sibling, how would you respond to me reading this to you?"

"What would you like me to know after the time we've spent together through this article?"

"Do you have any ideas about how you can engage in the "being" and "becoming" with other gender diverse people?"

A final note to the reader:

"The future of gender will be shaped by the ways in which we practice vulnerability, nonviolence, and relationality."

Judith Butler (they/them)

We made it to the end of the song, and as I write this not knowing who will - and if you will - make it to end with me. Writing this has offered a unique opportunity to be vulnerable, engage with and invite you into thinking and action. I have not named institutions mentioned here to de-contextualise them,

while you may be able to guess, I ask that you hold in mind this was written at this moment in time as a snapshot. My own feelings might change, and so might yours as time passes, perhaps welcoming fluidity and transition comes as no surprise for us to hold right up to the end.

I reasonably hope for a future with more hopeful snapshots; much can change still.

For those of you who danced with me until the end, thank you for doing hope with me. I'll leave you with one last quote that I'm sitting with, and an invitation to share your answers to the questions with all involved in this Beyond the Binary issue.

“When we practice reasonable hope with our clients, we become part of the process by which possible futures emerge. In this way, doing reasonable hope together becomes a profoundly creative process, requiring radical listening and a radically open heart.”

Kaethe Weingarten

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About the author

Vanessa Coeli de Oliveira-Jay (they/them) is a genderqueer non-binary Trainee Clinical Psychologist, an LGBTQ+ advocate and activist. They have co-produced a clinical resource titled “Working with LGBTQIA+ young people in CAMHS” with Dafni Katsampa, co-led LGBTQIA+ affirming talking therapy training within NHS trusts, and work closely with LGBTQ+, and Trans+ organisations. They have also contributed to writings within The Mental Elf online journal disseminating LGBTQ+ research. Vanessa’s practice and way of being has been shaped by their migration experience, lived experiences, relationships and resistance. They credit their appreciation and embracing of systemic and narrative practice to their previous supervisor Dr Rachel Ames, and their words and ways of being to their international chosen family, family, friends and community.

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