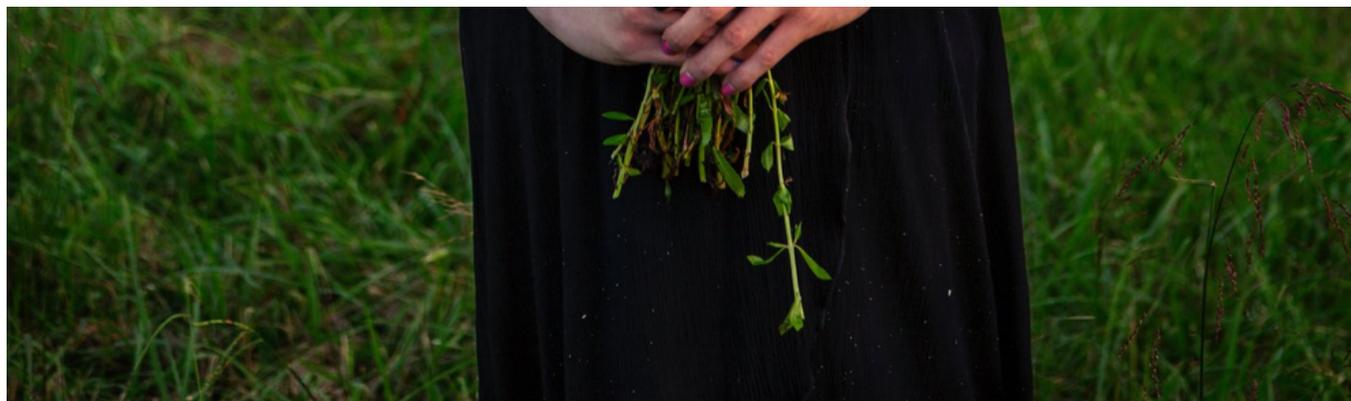


# The Struggles of Rejecting the Gender Binary

By Daniel Bergner June 4, 2019





Salem, a nonbinary 20-year-old in North Carolina. Jessica Dimmock for The New York Times

'Why didn't you wear makeup today?'

Jan Tate asked her client during a therapy session in May of last year.

"I didn't feel the need to."

"Would today be the day to begin using Salem instead of Hannah?"

There was a long pause and a hushed reply: "Yeah. But it would hurt a lot worse to start asking people to call me Salem and have them not do it than not to ask them."

Tate is a psychotherapist at the Carolina Partners clinic in Durham, N.C. She specializes in clients who are pushing against the bounds of gender. Salem is 20 and was, in the phrase Salem prefers, assigned male at birth, with a more clearly masculine name — that it is a "deadname" is all Salem will say about it. Salem uses gender-neutral they/them pronouns. They'd failed, so far, to get their parents, their sister or their two remaining friends to understand and accept that they were neither a man nor a woman, that they were nonbinary, gender fluid, gender expansive. They'd chosen the name Salem to fit with their identity, but they'd almost never asked anyone to call them by it. It was easier — definitely not easy, but easier — to let themselves be considered conventionally transgender, male to female, and go by the name Hannah.

Tate, who is 31, suggested that Salem practice the request now, in the

safety of her office. Sitting across from the therapist, they could hardly manage it — “Can you call me Salem?” — and as soon as they did, they turned their face away. Their brown hair fell with a loose curl just past their slim shoulders. Unlike two days before, when Salem arrived for therapy with their full lips in dark red lipstick and a dash of blush across each cheekbone, and with their long fingernails painted a bright lavender, this afternoon there was only the nail polish.

They wore a gray V-neck T-shirt and jeans. With an ankle crossed over the other knee, they picked at the rubber rim of one of their sneakers, picking, picking. The pain of being nonbinary was “excruciating,” they told me later, a torment mixing disconnection from themselves and isolation from everyone else. Tate said to me that “I often find myself gut-knotted after sessions with Salem, because of the things they don’t say” — because of the feelings Salem kept locked away, even from her, for fear that their experience was inexpressible, incomprehensible. She imagined Salem in an “abyss,” undergoing a torture that was the emotional equivalent of “taking a saw blade and cutting into the skin of an arm.”

Tate was raised Southern Baptist on a small tobacco-and-cattle farm in a town not far from Salem’s. She is cisgender — the gender she was assigned at birth and her sense of identity match up. But she’s gay, and as a teenager, when she was struggling with her sexuality, she found solace in talks with the father of a close friend, a former deacon at her church, a middle-aged doctor who was making a full transition from male to female and was barred from the congregation and kicked out of her medical practice. Ever since, Tate has felt keenly for anyone pitted against gender conformity. She’s especially invested in the battles of people like Salem, who yearn not to go from one category to the other but to escape altogether. And philosophically, she’s electrified by the profound challenge that people like Salem put up against dominant preconceptions. What if our most fundamental means of perceiving and classifying one another is illusory and can be swept away?

As Tate worked with Salem, she had, at home, a pet tortoise; whenever she mentioned it in conversation, she used “they” and “them.” With a freckled, impish face, she relishes small acts of defiance. The windowsills in her office were lined with flowers she’d pilfered from various spots around the city. In her first session with Salem, months earlier, when Salem clung to silence, she coaxed them into speech by asking which was their favorite of the flowers and plants on the sills and floor. They chose a dwarfish plant with twisted stems.



Salem, in their therapist's office. Jessica Dimmock for The New York Times

Except for therapy, Salem rarely left the house where they live with their family, in a town that's a half-hour's drive outside Durham, amid farmland and forest. The town center consists of a little gun shop, a squat brick Post Office and an old stone church.

Tate, who wore a floral dress and brown wingtips, asked whether Salem could “imagine a world where the binary does not exist.” She went on:

"We all police one another. Women police women, men police men. If the policing didn't exist, what would things be like for you?"

But Salem couldn't envision such a fantasy. They looked increasingly distressed, face rigid and eyes glazed.

Tate switched the subject to the hormones Salem had been taking for two months: a low dose of spironolactone, a testosterone blocker, and estradiol, a type of estrogen. Salem felt driven to feminize their body, to lessen their constant alienation from their own anatomy — and their self-revulsion — but wasn't at all sure what the right combination of feminine and masculine would be. Different days brought different answers. From the hormones, their breasts were buds. "I could foresee breasts bothering me," Salem told Tate, though they believed they wanted them. "I just have to hope the hormones don't make too big of a problem."

Even so, Tate commented tentatively that Salem seemed more confident since starting the hormones, that Salem seemed to be making progress in accepting themselves.

"While I'm presenting myself as more comfortable," Salem mumbled, head bowed, "the feeling I have is that I hate myself." They sometimes called themselves a monster. Tate has another nonbinary client who cut themselves relentlessly across their shoulders, leaving "scars on scars on scars" that the client asked Tate to touch. Weeks before this session, Salem stripped naked in their bedroom and, with a marker, scrawled "tranny" and "faggot" all over their body, slurs that were inaccurate but screamed their self-disgust.

For the next minutes, Salem tried to criticize Tate, to lash out at her, for failing to help them enough, and Tate encouraged the effort. But quickly Salem fell mute. Body utterly still, they withdrew further and further, the glaze of their eyes clouding, until Tate felt that her client was in a state of dissociation, totally detached from their own surroundings, absent from

the room, from themselves, gone.

Laura Jacobs, 49, a therapist who identifies as nonbinary. Jessica Dimmock for The New York Times

Tate grabbed a bunch of blossoms and put them in Salem's hands: purple irises, blue bachelor buttons. The colors and smells — the immediacy of sensation — were a way to rescue them, to bring them back. She took a blank index card from her desk and asked Salem to dictate to her some personal facts, another method of making her client re-inhabit themselves.

"I play video games," they said tonelessly. Then a retreat: "My name is Hannah."

Tate wrote these things out and gave Salem the card. Hunched over, shoulders curled inward, Salem clutched the card and the flowers.

**Just in the** last few years, nonbinary identity has been slowly seeping into societal consciousness. [A nonbinary actor, Asia Kate Dillon](#), has starred since 2017 as a nonbinary character on the Showtime series "Billions." A raft of new nonbinary models are featured in fashion spreads, and [a Coke ad, aired during the 2018 Super Bowl](#), paired an androgynous face with a pointed gender-neutral pronoun. "There's a Coke," the voice-over said, "for he and she and her and me and them." Nonbinary as a category has even slipped into state laws. In 2016, an Oregon court granted a plaintiff the right to label themselves nonbinary on their driver's license, and by now, though the Trump administration proclaims that gender is a simple matter of biology, [some dozen states, from New York to Utah](#), offer some form of Oregon's flexibility. Yet the nation's glimmers of tolerance don't necessarily mean much — even in New York, let alone in rural North Carolina — when you're living in opposition to our most basic way of seeing and sorting and comprehending one another.

It's impossible to say how many Salems, how many nonbinary people, there are across the United States. Surveys have yet to deal with this

reliably. And any researcher who takes on the question will run into a problem with terminology. An abundance of labels, with subtle distinctions, are in play. *Neutrois* and *gender nonconforming* and *demiboy* and *demigirl* and *pangender* and *genderqueer* are among the array of closely related identities that could confound any demographer. Another complication is that many nonbinary people also call themselves transgender or trans — not, as Salem has, to avoid explaining themselves, but as an umbrella term, encompassing all kinds of self-definition, all sorts of physical transformation and transgression of the norms of F and M.

“Data are scarce, and the research gaps are vast,” Jody Herman, a public-policy scholar at the U.C.L.A. School of Law’s Williams Institute, a think tank devoted to issues of gender and sexual orientation, told me, cautioning against any estimate of the country’s nonbinary population. That said, she pointed to an [analysis of two federal public-health surveys](#), conducted by phone in 2014 and 2015, on which 19 states included a brief optional section about gender identity. The results suggest — tenuously — that the total of all transgender-identified adults in the United States is in the neighborhood of 1.4 million. The optional section had a lone follow-up question seeking more specificity: “Do you consider yourself to be male-to-female, female-to-male or gender nonconforming?” Around one-fifth of those who identified as trans chose nonconforming. Yet at the very outset of the section, any interview subject asking for clarification about the meaning of transgender was given a traditional binary definition along with an example of someone born male but living as female. So anyone who rejected both male and female classifications was potentially excluded. All told, the results didn’t provide much insight into nonbinary numbers; instead, the surveys were a reminder of the confusion and ignorance surrounding the topic.

For anyone interested in nonbinary demographics, the surveys had another shortcoming. They excluded anyone under age 18, and

according to clinicians who specialize in gender, it's among the young that nonbinary identity is taking hold most rapidly. "It's growing exponentially," Linda Hawkins, co-director of the Gender and Sexuality Development Clinic at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, told me about the number of kids and youth in her practice — from ages 6 to 21 — who identify as nonbinary. Hawkins, who was a clinical professor of Tate's, has been working in the field for two decades. She talked about the importance, for young children, of recent picture books about fluidity, and of education programs for pediatricians, who are taught to respond with calm understanding when parents report that their children say they are "in the middle." At least, she added with a rueful laugh, pediatricians are taught this in places like Philadelphia. For older kids, the internet has delivered "a surge of nonbinary information, of nuances in gender expression, in the last five years," she said. "It has connected kids to supportive communities. Looking back, there were always nonbinary kids, but it's only in the last few years that there has been the language — language to not feel alone, to have a flag."

[\*\[Read about nonbinary teens petitioning lawmakers for drivers' licenses that reflects their gender identities.\]\*](#)

Laura A. Jacobs, a therapist in New York who focuses on L.G.B.T. clients, has seen some of the same nonbinary momentum. Jacobs is 49 and nonbinary (they prefer "genderqueer"), but Jacobs is a rarity; the identity, they said, is the province mainly of people under 30. Its underground beginnings, they explained, can be traced well back in time, but one iteration emerged in the 1990s, with theorists like Judith Butler, who wrote about gender as a culturally scripted performance, based in social norms rather than biology, imposed much more than innate; and with activists like Kate Bornstein, who fully surgically transitioned from male to female in the mid-1980s, only to write in her 1994 manifesto, "Gender Outlaw": "I know I'm not a man ... and I've come to the conclusion that I'm probably not a woman. ... The trouble is, we're living in a world that insists

we be one or the other. ... All my life, my nontraditional gender identity had been my biggest secret, my deepest shame."

With their long hair in a ponytail, and wearing thick leather boots and a button-down shirt and tie, Jacobs said that over the last several years, some psychiatric and medical providers have started to let go of binary assumptions and the idea that hormones and surgery should be offered only to those who suffer an agonizing need to remake the body as completely as possible from female to male or male to female. It may not be easy, but nowadays people who wish to exist somewhere other than these two endpoints, and who feel they can't get far enough by nonmedical means — clothing choices; a name change; chest binding; penis tucking and taping — can find endocrinologists and surgeons to treat them. Still, the goal of treatment is often unclear to the patient themselves; the prevailing binary paradigm doesn't apply. The need is to get *beyond*, but how?

"Think of getting out of the shower and standing in front of a mirror," Jacobs said. "For most people, cis people, it's easy to see those body parts as belonging to us, even if we might rather they be smaller or bigger or more muscular or whatnot. Now imagine that the mirror is a little blurry, streaky with steam. And let's say you're a binary trans person who hasn't yet transitioned. Around the edges of the blurriness, between the streaks, you can at least imagine the reflection you want; you know what it is. But the nonbinary person may not have an image; even with the help of the foggy mirror, they may not be able to find themselves."

Jacobs heard themselves straining to communicate the dilemma they hoped to describe. Trying to evoke nonbinary experience for binary people, in a world where nearly everyone is raised with an either-or concept of gender, can feel liberating, but also futile: wearying, dispiriting, sometimes devastating. Whether in culturally conservative or liberal America, the subjective divide can feel too wide to bridge. This

was something I heard again and again during countless conversations spanning eight states. And being nonbinary can feel inexplicable to yourself; the longings for physical alteration can feel both indefinite and indefensible. The harshest doubt can come from within.

**"I am reconstructing** sea level during Marine Isotope Stage 5a," Kai Morsink, a Columbia University senior, told a roomful of earth-and-environmental-sciences students as the class gave presentations last November. Kai is 21, was assigned female at birth, uses masculine pronouns and is nonbinary. In a dress shirt, a black-and-white vest and black chinos, with his dark hair clipped short and parted boyishly on the side, he stood at the lectern, speaking at high speed and clicking through graphs and images of fossilized coral. He sounded nothing less than thrilled as he described his study site on Barbados, detailed its tectonic history, discussed the density of information his reef contained, elaborated on its relevance to climate change and announced, as his 10 minutes came to a close, "My future holds a lot of data collection!"

A classmate, responding to Kai's exuberance, raised a hand and asked how he'd found such a perfect project. And indeed, to spend time with Kai is to be entranced by his expressiveness on topics ranging from paleoceanography to gender theory, from classical singing to his own sense of inescapable difference. "It's like standing right beside a hanging punching bag," he said, as we talked one afternoon at a cafe near the Columbia campus. "You push it away, and it swings back to hit you. You push it away farther, and it hits you harder. You push it again — farther — and it clobbers you."

Kai talked about having long identified with "effeminate, foppish" males in literature, from Romeo to recurrent types in romance novels, and about adoring Julie Andrews as a gender-pretzeling nightclub performer in "Victor/Victoria." He wore, that day, another dress shirt and vest — blue and red, floral-patterned, flashy. Underneath, as always, he wore a

binder. He said he'd decided on top surgery, the removal of his breasts, as a next step, to be taken soon after graduation.

But he was still debating hormones, whose effects are unpredictable — frighteningly so for Kai. There would be facial hair, sparse or thick. His voice would drop to an unknown degree. His wish was to be perceived as more masculine yet not male, feminine yet not female. What precisely he desired, physically, was a puzzle he was forever trying to solve. And he treasured singing as a mezzo-soprano; he dreaded that loss. But when I asked about the first time he felt the heavy punching bag swinging back to strike him, or any hint that he couldn't fit into conventional notions of gender, Kai replied with resolution. "There are ways I could speak retrospectively," he said. "The way I was terrified of getting my ears pierced and fled the mall when I was 11. The way I freaked out over my period. There's a temptation to shape a narrative about how it's inherent in me to be nonbinary. But I want to go the other way and say, we're all born nonbinary. We learn gender. And at some point, some of us can't stand it anymore."

Kai grew up in the Maryland suburbs outside Washington; both his parents are economists. He came out to them as genderqueer a year and a half ago, and they, as he put it, were willing "to step through the door" he held wide for them, the door into his way of seeing himself. They read a piece of creative writing he gave them, a meditation using Dadaism to explicate the nonsense of either-or. His mother asked if she could buy him new clothes. "Shopping for clothes was something we'd always done," he said. "It was her way of saying, 'I want to keep being part of your life.' That was really stepping through the door. And then, all the nerve-rackingness of shopping in the men's section of a department store and trying on pants and worrying about how people are looking at you and reading your gender, it would have been really hard to do on my own. But my mother was there. Just like when we'd shopped together before. And that made it normal."

[\[Read about gender-neutral design for children.\]](#)

Not everyone in Kai's world, though, has been so willing. Coming out requires preparation, putting on emotional armor. On a road trip through Pennsylvania, he confided recently in one of his closest childhood friends, hoping for the intimacy of the sleepovers they'd once had. The woman listened. She wasn't critical. But as they drove, and as Kai invited her repeatedly to ask questions, she remained disengaged. Recounting his friend's resistance, pain caught at Kai's quick words, making him pause. The pain came both from without, from the friend's refusal, and from within. "One of the hardest things for me," he said, "is to say to myself, Yes, I'm real." His voice trembled. "I don't make sense. I have this theoretical framework which I think is better for the world, a framework where we have different bodies but where gender is almost entirely socially constructed, where people can articulate whatever they want about their gender. But if the theory is right, then I wouldn't care at all about transitioning" to some undetermined physiological midpoint.

Logically and philosophically, for Kai, bodies signified nothing; physiology was without meaning. "But I do — I care, very much," he said. Logic and longing were irreconcilable. And for someone as smart and scientific as Kai, this was barely endurable. The contradiction between anatomical irrelevance and anatomical yearning was an existential challenge. "What I'm feeling is that there's this internal, eternal thing that is always going to be saying, 'You as you exist are not real.' "

He was on the brink of tears. "I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to get all dramatic on you."

**When Salem was 8**, their family moved from Plaistow, N.H., to Indian Land, S.C. Sometime before then, they recalled, their sister was learning to paint her fingernails and asked to do Salem's. They let their sister use only clear polish, for fear that they would like the colors too well. In South Carolina, they endured almost a decade of bullying — for being

"borderline obese from big stress eating," Salem told me (since then Salem has slimmed down by running late at night, when the roads around their town are empty), for their good grades (until, in high school, anxiety kept them home so often that their grades bottomed out and they barely graduated) and maybe, they can't be sure, because other kids detected a difference that Salem wasn't yet admitting to themselves. Salem was called porky and brown-noser and faggot and punched in the chest and hit in the groin with footballs and dodge balls and a makeshift ball and chain wielded at high velocity by a boy they considered a friend.

Salem withdrew to a mostly online existence, in which friendships — with three classmates, counting the bully with the ball and chain — consisted of playing video games, each kid in a separate, solo space at home but communing over shared screens, gunning and grenading enemy fighters. Salem invested so much time in the warfare of one game that they eventually rose past two million other players, they said, murmuring with enough modesty to be believed, and were fleetingly ranked first on the game's leader board.

"I was very angry at that time, really miserable," they said. Online, they and their friends lured solitary, hapless players into the front seat of their armored vehicle with promises of safety. Salem, sitting behind, shot them in the back of the head. In the mirror, Salem despised their new facial hair; they tried to overcome the repulsion by growing mutton chops and a scraggly beard. They spent uncountable hours on YouTube channels that espoused white nationalism and denounced, as one alt-right ranter declared, the "feminization" and "mass, uncontrolled third-world immigration" that was destroying Western civilization. They steered their three friends to these channels: "I was spreading my awful views." With these friends, Salem mocked binary trans people and cracked jokes about nonbinary gender and gender fluidity, saying there was no such thing. But they didn't let themselves think too much about the terms they scorned, "because," they told me, "I guess my self was trying to protect

itself. If I had thought about gender for any length of time, I might have come to some uncomfortable conclusions.”

For Salem, as for so many, the internet wound up being an inadvertent route to self-recognition. In the late summer of 2016 — soon after Salem finished high school and their family moved to North Carolina, where their father had a new job managing an auto-repair shop in Raleigh — they first stared at manga featuring feminine men having sex with women. Salem was attracted to the women, while finding themselves wishing they looked like those men. Before that, something else had happened online. Despite their alt-right allegiance, they were drawn to the economic ideas of Bernie Sanders’s presidential campaign. After the November election, Salem’s new politics took them to anarchist sites and from there to videos posted by people announcing themselves as nonbinary. They were taken with the caustic style of a video called [“I Am Genderqueer and Wtf That Means”](#) by a YouTuber named ContraPoints.

Yet self-recognition, for Salem, wasn’t liberating; it was the opposite. It required secrecy. It deepened Salem’s hiding, their isolation. The pain of self-concealment accumulated for months, until, Salem said, “I would rather have gotten kicked out of the house and become homeless and died than go on the way I was living.”

[\[Read about social media as a tool for nonbinary people.\]](#)

They decided to tell their sister, who is two years older, before telling their parents. The talk, in the summer of 2017, did not go well. Their sister, in Salem’s memory, was bewildered and dismissive: “I explained to her that I planned to present myself as more feminine and change my name to something more feminine, and she was like, Well, if you don’t feel like you’re a woman, why would you want to do any of that?” Salem had no coherent answer. Language eluded them. She later told them it must be a phase, that Salem would get over it, all of which, for Salem, felt like a drubbing of their reality.

Their sister remembered this conversation somewhat differently, when I spoke with her by phone, with Salem on the line. "I was confused about what they were telling me," she said. "I think I reacted fairly positively."

Later in the summer, Salem steeled themselves to come out to two of their three South Carolina friends. (Salem chose to wait on saying anything to the bully.) It was 3 in the morning. Playing a Vietnam War game online, Salem and one of the friends were North Vietnamese soldiers defending a hilltop, with a napalmed landscape separating them from the American infantry lower down on the hill. The second friend was just listening; all three had an audio link. Sporadically the Americans gave up their jungle cover and tried to rush near enough to take out the North Vietnamese, but Salem, in the role of an N.V.A. squad commander, gunned them down with a light, low-recoil assault rifle that was ideal for the situation. During a lull, Salem figured it was time. But given their failure with their sister, they elided the truth and took a more comprehensible tack. Via audio, they said they were a trans woman.

"You're [expletive] with me," Salem recounted their friends saying over and over. Convincing the two took some doing, because of Salem's alt-right history. With scattered Americans lurching forward to take potshots across a field of charred trees and bomb craters, Salem aimed swiftly and killed enemy grunts and told their two friends they were serious, adding, with all the hope they could muster, "I'm still the same person, so not much has changed."

**JP Hyzy** has a discreet tattoo of the pronoun "them" on one arm. They're in their mid-20s, are in training to become a massage therapist and recalled going to the bathroom at a concert in Carrboro, a town outside Chapel Hill, after the passage of North Carolina's House Bill 2. The state's so-called "bathroom bill" won overwhelming approval in the legislature in 2016, mandating that in publicly-owned buildings people had to use the restroom corresponding to their biological sex as signified

on their birth certificate. Hyzy, who takes hormones and has breasts, said they were followed into the men's room by someone who then pounded on Hyzy's stall door. Nothing more happened, but the moment was terrifying. After threats of boycotts by national companies and the N.C.A.A., the law has since been repealed, but it's the source of continuing legislative and legal battles; for Hyzy, neither the fear nor the feeling of denigration has dissipated. "I am this thing," they said, "that isn't allowed."

Like Salem, Hyzy first encountered the word "nonbinary" online. Shortly before that, three years ago, they thought they might be a trans woman. They took the step of going to a voice clinic with the paradoxical hope of learning to pitch their voice higher but not of having a more feminine voice, not exactly. The intake questions of the clinic staff, who assumed Hyzy was embarking on a binary transition — "When are you getting the surgery?" — helped Hyzy to realize that wasn't the goal.

Yet what set of alterations would bring peace, a feeling that the physical is in sync with the psychological, is uncertain. Maybe, Hyzy said, it will be elusive forever. One thing, though, is achingly plain: "It's hard to get people to understand that nonbinary isn't made up." Three practitioners Hyzy has turned to in Chapel Hill — a therapist, a psychiatrist and another therapist with a professed specialty in gender — have responded with bafflement.

H.B. 2 turned out to be a harbinger of a broader political strategy on the American right. The effort has featured the [Trump administration's decrees](#) that gender should be legally defined, immutably, by biology at birth, and the arguments made by Roger Severino, Trump's director of the Office for Civil Rights at the Department of Health and Human Services, that positions taken by the Obama administration — including letting openly trans people serve in the military — amounted to a "radical new gender ideology" and [must be rolled back](#). For the nonbinary,

though, negation can even come from within the L.G.B.T. community. David Baker-Hargrove is a therapist and the founding president and co-chief executive of Two Spirit Health, which provides medical and mental health care to L.G.B.T. clients throughout Central Florida. He's gay and has been working with binary trans people for more than two decades, yet he remembered that with his initial nonbinary cases three or four years ago, he had to "really explore the oppressive in my own thinking about gender norms" and felt, at first, "I can't get there." He added: "It took me a while. Our brains fight fluidity. We like *this* or *that*. Nonbinary presents a lot of challenges." And not only cis people resist the concept. "Transgender people can react with 'Pick a side' or 'Nonbinary is an insult to my experience — it's crap.'" Baker-Hargrove has recently begun identifying as nonbinary.

To make the doubt and dismissal faced by nonbinary people worse, some physicians and surgeons who are committed to treating binary trans patients with hormones and surgery are wary of doing the same for the nonbinary, questioning whether the interventions are psychiatrically, and therefore medically, necessary. The bible of psychiatric diagnosis, the D.S.M., gives meager help; its criteria for the condition of "gender dysphoria" are essentially binary. And insurers sometimes refuse to pay for care that isn't couched in a binary narrative. So the nonbinary can be forced to dissemble, to erase their own truths and fabricate a familiar transmale or transfemale tale, in order to get the treatment — the hormones and breast removals, the Adam's-apple reductions and facial recontourings — they seek.

**In their sun-filled** apartment in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, D'hana Perry worked one morning last winter on an installation for an exhibit at the New Museum. Perry, a nonbinary video artist and D.J. and a program manager at an L.G.B.T. health center, sat before laptops and a MIDI controller as they contemplated a piece that would pay homage to the role of three trans activists in the Stonewall riots of 1969, an event widely

recognized as pivotal in gay history but scarcely known as being partly driven by — and being crucial for — trans people. Perry was designing video projections of the three leaders, Marsha P. Johnson, Miss Major Griffin-Gracy and Sylvia Rivera, and talked about how their work contributed to the relative freedom Perry feels today. As an African-American, Perry also wanted to honor them; all three are people of color.

Perry, who is 41 and was assigned female at birth, had top surgery at 33 and has been taking hormones for 4 years. Their voice is high, but their beard is heavy. Dressed, this morning, in a red-and-black-checked lumberjack shirt, with their hair in dreads, they looked “like a straight guy,” they said, quoting their friends. This characterization didn’t sit well with Perry. “Straight guy” was not how they felt. But Perry has been wearing thick flannels and hoodies as a nonbinary person since before the hormones and beard, when their round face was smooth and the masculine clothes signaled complication, and Perry wasn’t going to change styles now. They were tired of worrying about how they were perceived. They weren’t going to fret over their wardrobe. There was art to be made, history and progress to be commemorated.

Perry exuded a comfort with themselves that was hard won. They grew up in Cleveland; their father was a preacher at an A.M.E. Zionist church where their mother was the music director; Perry was forbidden to attend health classes at school when the topic was sex education. Their father died before Perry identified as nonbinary; with their mother, Perry attempted a delicate, incremental coming out, spread over more than a decade, with mentions of being trans and of “breast reduction” surgery. Their mother, Perry told me, refused to listen. She said she would rather be lied to. Perry still wasn’t sure whether she fully acknowledged to herself that Perry is nonbinary, but a year ago there was a breakthrough: She traveled to Brooklyn and joined Perry and their nonbinary partner, along with two cis queer friends and one of their mothers, for Thanksgiving dinner. “My mother misgendered me all night,” Perry said,

"calling me 'she' and 'girl,' and it drove my friends crazy, but I told them, 'You don't know the way it used to be.' "

JP Hyzy, in their mid-20s, first encountered the word "nonbinary" online, having earlier believed they might be a trans woman. Jessica Dimmock for The New York Times

Perry's comfort seemed to come in part from age, from having lived longer than most outside the presumptive boundaries. The same seemed true for Laura Jacobs, the 49-year-old nonbinary therapist who spoke to me about the foggy mirror. As a boy in the 1970s, at around age 6, Jacobs remembered, they were enthralled by the way ailing characters on "Star Trek" were cured on a high-tech bed with a device that encased a portion of the body. On the playroom floor in the family's suburban house, Jacobs lay on their back with a chair over them, imagining that this version of the Trekkian contraption would cure their unhappiness by turning them into a girl.

They were in their late 20s before they summoned the courage to raise their yearnings with their therapist, who had no relevant expertise, and in their early 30s when they started taking hormones, developed breasts and underwent genital surgery. But the straightforward wish of their childhood had, by then, grown complicated in ways they couldn't find words for. "I remember wondering during those years" — the late '90s, the early 2000s — "if a middle path was possible, but I had no idea what a middle path would be. I didn't hear 'genderqueer' till years after my surgery. I thought gender was a binary choice, so I made the choice to switch sides."

In addition to their work as a therapist, Jacobs is a speaker at medical schools and trans conferences, a champion for both nonbinary and binary trans people and co-author of a book called " 'You're in the Wrong Bathroom!' And 20 Other Myths and Misconceptions About Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming People." Jacobs is also something of a visionary, outlining a future when technology that's already near —

sensate prostheses; virtual reality that's thoroughly immersive — will make our relationships to our bodies “artistic, the results of acts of creation. We won't have to stick with two arms and two legs, and our genitalia won't necessarily look male or female, with merely a penis or a vagina.”

They thought back, during one of our many conversations, to the aftermath of their own decision to have a vagina surgically constructed, a decision made in the absence of the language and intricate self-understanding that defines their life now. They've always been sexually attracted to women and “femme-leaning” people. “I was having sex with women,” they said, “and a lot of women who have sex with women use strap-ons. I refused to even consider it. I couldn't reconcile having made the choice to get rid of the real thing with using a plastic replica. The idea put me into shock; I would dissociate, become a deer in headlights. Wearing a strap-on symbolized a massive mistake. I felt that exploring it would lead to massive regret. But as the years went on, I started to dabble. It was hot, fun.”

Our talk shifted again from the past to the future. Jacobs spoke about foreseeing a time when people passing each other on the street wouldn't immediately, unconsciously sort one another into male or female, which even Jacobs reflexively does. “I don't know what genders are going to look like four generations from now,” they added, allowing that they might sound utopian, naïve. “I think we're going to perceive each other as people. The classifications we live under will fall by the wayside.”

Among the voices of the young, there are echoes and amplifications of Jacobs's optimism, along with the stories of private struggle. “There are as many genders as there are people,” Emmy Johnson, a nonbinary employee at Jan Tate's clinic, told me with earnest authority. Johnson was about to sign up for a new dating app that caters to the genderqueer. “Sex is different as a nonbinary person,” they said. “You're free of gender

roles, and the farther you can get from those scripts, the better sex is going to be." Their tone was more triumphal: the better *life* is going to be. "The gender boxes are exploding," they declared.

A New Jersey-based therapist in her 50s, who describes herself as a butch lesbian and who has worked with nearly two dozen nonbinary high school and college students, is more circumspect. She guessed that many of her assigned-female nonbinary clients would once have lived as butch or — a subcategory — stone butch lesbians. "Are we just being faddish in the wish for more and more individualized identities?" she asked. And what percentage of the nonbinary kids now coming to her will be calling themselves nonbinary 10 or 15 years in the future? "To tell you the truth, I can't be sure." But despite her skepticism, her sense is that something urgent is going on, that new and necessary territory is being delineated. She's not, at base, at odds with Jacobs, who wonders if we will all gradually question whether "the gender binary is inherent to human experience."

D'hana Perry, 41, an artist in Brooklyn. Jessica Dimmock for The New York Times

[\*\[Tell us who you are.\]\*](#)

**In the months** after Salem confided, on the Vietnamese hillside, that they were a trans woman, their two South Carolina friends went on ridiculing trans people, but the friends still played war games with them and slowly cut back on their jokes. Next, Salem informed their third South Carolina friend. He later replied, they said, with "a transphobic tirade — he called me a tranny and a faggot and told me to kill myself."

Within Salem's family, too, there was the good and the not-so-good. When, in late August 2017, they told their parents about being a trans woman and about naming themselves Hannah, they weren't kicked out of the house. Their mother helped Salem find a therapist — Tate. And their father helped them paint their bedroom in light blue, white and pink

stripes, the colors of the trans flag, though he also had counseled Salem not to consider themselves transgender until they'd had sex, as if Salem's first romp with a girl would fix everything.

Their father got them a job keeping inventory within the chain of auto-repair shops where he worked, advising Salem to use their deadname and hide who they'd become. (About this, and the suggestion that Salem not settle on being trans until they'd lost their virginity, Salem's father told me alternately that he hadn't said these things, that he might have implied something about the effect of having sex for the first time and that too much time had passed; I should "write whatever Salem remembers," he said.) Salem lasted through two days of training, anxiety spiking over what might happen if they were found out and depression deepening because they were making themselves invisible, concealing Hannah and, beneath that, doubly burying their nonbinary self. "The salary was a good deal," Salem said, but on the day they were supposed to turn in their paperwork and join the staff, "I just lay in bed." They returned to being housebound. "I just couldn't get out of bed."

Salem had an inkling that there were other places, beyond their hometown, beyond North Carolina, where they might not feel quite so alien and alone. Tate had mentioned Philadelphia, where she'd trained, or Brooklyn. In therapy one day last spring, Salem talked about the main character in ["Into the Wild"](#): a young man, cut off in the Alaskan wilderness, who starves to death because he's unaware that there's a spot, a half mile from where he's wasting away, where he could cross the swollen river that entraps him. On the other side, he could soon get food. "People say the dude was an idiot," Salem said to Tate, "because he could have lived if he realized there was a crossing nearby. But I can understand him. To me, he's relatable." It was as if Salem both knew and didn't know that other places existed.

After the session, Salem drove northward on the state highway, toward

the exit for their town. They passed the turnoff and kept going in the direction of the Virginia line. They'd never done anything like this before. They drove, they told me the next day, with their town behind them, for an hour before they turned around.

When I spent more time with them last summer, Salem had just noted their hormone treatment in a chat among players during an online game. Someone let loose with slurs, Salem fired back and another player piped up that she was a trans woman. This was a minor godsend amid the plundering and killing onscreen. Right away, the trans woman, who said she was 19, became Salem's close friend, at a distance of hundreds of miles. They talked privately online every day and night; Salem listened to her troubles with her father, and she gave Salem the courage to try buying their first bra.

Salem's breasts had grown. The plan was to buy a sports bra both for exercising and "to compress, because sometimes" — though the hormones seemed a success on most days — "I'm not a fan of my breasts." Salem drove to Chapel Hill, the most liberal community in the area, and sat paralyzed in a shopping-center parking lot with the trans woman coaching them by phone. At last, they ventured into Target. They scouted the store, angling into the women's section. They fled without touching an item, searching for a place where they could delay, bypassing electronics because a salesperson was sure to approach, and the last thing Salem wanted, in this state of mortification over bra shopping and over their mix of jeans, Vans, T-shirt, nail polish, mascara and small but noticeable breasts, was to interact with anyone. An aisle of groceries gave refuge. They stared at varieties of pasta. They got their new friend on the phone again and headed back to women's clothing, figuring that this way it would seem they were shopping for someone else; they plucked two sports bras from a rack and made it through self-checkout.

To Tate, the friendship was reassuring progress, especially after Salem and the trans woman communicated by live video chat, proving that the friend was who she claimed to be. There was progress, too, in all the colors Salem had begun using on successive fingernails — greenish-yellow, pink, white, orange, purple, blue.

Salem had by then finally explained to their parents that they weren't actually a trans woman, that in fact they were nonbinary, but their parents, in Salem's telling, were unresponsive, almost as if they couldn't hear. (Salem's mother had a different version: "We were just so open about everything," she told me.) During therapy sessions, Salem still sometimes lapsed into despair, yet by this winter, online, they made some friends from Durham and Raleigh, an eclectic bunch, sexually queer, genderqueer, and started going out with them in public. Early this spring Salem took part in an International Transgender Day of Visibility, having their picture taken, in an orange dress and combat boots, with 10 or so binary trans and nonbinary people on a street in downtown Raleigh. The housebound Salem seemed to be in the past.

This May, pairing a rose-colored dress with their combat boots, Salem walked the paths on the campus of a Durham community college, where they had just enrolled, and began their required classes. Their plan is to transfer eventually to a four-year program far from home. Salem has always loved history; when we first met, our discussions detoured into World War II historiography. Lately, after reading, on their own, Peter Kropotkin's "The Conquest of Bread" and listening to Slavoj Žižek's lectures online, they imagine someday being a professor, teaching economic history and sparking social change. I asked, a few weeks ago, whether they ever envision teaching about gender.

"Obviously, talking about gender is something I can do, because I've been doing it for a year with you," they said. "But I don't want to make a career out of it." They thought, then, about standing before a lecture hall

filled with students. "As a nonbinary person, existing in front of people is a political statement. I will be there, existing in front of them."