



## Non-binary Superpowers!

*A collaborative conversation between non-binary youth in Adelaide, South Australia, and non-binary youth in Calgary, Alberta.*

*Co-facilitated by Rosie Maeder and Tiffany Sostar*

*Written up by Tiffany Sostar*



### Abstract

A common experience of folks who identify outside of binary gender is that of erasure, an experience of not being seen, fighting daily to 'prove' that our identities and experiences are 'real' and 'valid'. In April and May of 2019, two small groups of Trans and Non-Binary (enby) young people and some of their loved ones came together on opposite sides of the world. Tiffany Sostar (they/them) and Rosie Maeder (she/her) hosted narrative conversations in Adelaide, Australia, and Calgary, Canada, and linked them through a collective document. This was the beginning of an ongoing trans-continental conversation exploring the skills, knowledges and experiences of Non-Binary young people and of the ways they are or hope to be seen and supported by loved ones. Tiffany and Rosie hoped to draw out rich, multi-storied accounts of Non-Binary experiences and to make visible the skills, knowledges and complicated superpowers required to resist rigid constructs of gender. They seek to further subvert Non-Binary invisibility by sharing these stories with other enby folks and anyone else who wants to learn more about Non-Binary experiences or identities – including and especially Narrative Practitioners who work with Trans and Non-Binary young people.

**Key words:** *non-binary, trans, transgender, collective practice, gender*

## The Origin Story

Rosie and Tiffany are both part of the Master of Narrative Therapy and Community Work degree at the University of Melbourne and Dulwich Centre in Adelaide, Australia. They worked together as part of a group that presented on trans and non-binary gender identity during the program, and became great friends! They've both noticed the need for increased support for non-binary communities, and this project is one way they're hoping to respond to that need. This document was written up by Tiffany Sostar with editing and feedback from group participants in both Adelaide and Calgary.

## The Plan

About once a month, the groups will meet for a conversation – one in Adelaide, and one in Calgary. We'll spend part of the conversation responding to each other's questions and stories, and part of the time having our own conversations and generating the conversations and stories that we'd like to send back to the other group.

By arranging this kind of back-and-forth conversation, we hope to build connections and a sense of solidarity and community within both Adelaide and Calgary, and across the 17 hours that separate the two cities.

## The Invitation

One of the goals of this project is to extend the conversation between and about non-binary youth to folks who haven't been able to find their own community yet, or to folks who want to be part of a larger conversation.

We would love to hear from you.

Did something that you read in this document resonate for you?

Do you have insider knowledge into the experience of being non-binary that you would like to share?

Is something here particularly meaningful or moving for you?

You can send your responses to Tiffany Sostar in Calgary at: [sostarsselfcare@gmail.com](mailto:sostarsselfcare@gmail.com), and to Rosie Maeder in Adelaide at: [RosieM@unitingcommunities.org](mailto:RosieM@unitingcommunities.org).

And if you'd like to start your own non-binary conversation group, and have your notes included in future collective documents, we would be thrilled to speak with you about that!

## The Conversation in Adelaide

The first event in the non-binary youth conversation group happened in Adelaide, South Australia, on 11th April 2019. This included a small group of non-binary youth, along with a few of their supportive parents, and the facilitators. Together, we represented a multi-generational mix of genders and experiences. Most people in the room shared an experience of non-binary gender, despite having many other differences in age, orientation, neurotype, family context, race, and class.

Describing the experience of being in the group, one participant said, 'Everything was amazing. Everything is so rich in our community.'

In fact, it was such a meaningful experience that we (Rosie and Tiffany, with agreement from the group) decided to extend the project from a single transcontinental conversation to a series of ongoing events in both Adelaide and Calgary.

## Group Agreements

It is always fine to not speak or to take time out if you need to.

Everyone participates differently, just because someone isn't speaking, doesn't mean they don't have thoughts, ideas and experiences they might like to share. We hope to make as much space for everyone to contribute and if you have additional things you want to add after the group is over, that will be possible too. Silence is okay too!

Not making assumptions – some of us might identify with particular words, others of us might be questioning or exploring new spaces. Wherever you are is completely okay. We all know what it's like to be questioned, disbelieved or told about who we are/aren't, so maybe in this space we can try something different. It's also ok to ask if you don't know what something means!

Is there anything people would want to talk about or to avoid.

## Complicated superpowers

One of the first topics that came up was the complex relationships that folks have with the skills and insider knowledges that being non-binary brings to our lives.

This is because people often assume that our actions are exceptional or heroic, even when we're just being

ourselves! It can put a lot of pressure on us, and make it hard to talk about the ways that we're struggling, or the times when we feel weak, sad, lonely, afraid, or ashamed. Although our superpowers are amazing and they are worth celebrating, it's also important to remember that we're just people. Sometimes we just want a boring day, no superheroics required.

This was a theme that came up many times over the course of the conversation, and it points to an important awareness of how the language of resilience and strength can end up feeling overwhelming and stifling sometimes.

There are times when we access a skill or superpower because we must, not because we want to.

### Guiding Questions

Although the conversation flowed freely across a range of topics, these are the questions that were prepared in advance:

- What is your non-binary super power?  
What is a skill you have or something that you have special knowledge about because of your experience in questioning/challenging/resisting the gender binary?
- Can you tell a story about this super power? When you first used it, how you got it, who else you share it with ...
- Is it connected with any songs or characters or sayings or images?
- What has this super power made more possible in your life?
- What can you imagine might be more possible in your future as a result of having this super power?
- Who in your life knows that you have this superpower?
- What would they say that you having and using this superpower says about what's important to you?
- What difference has this or will this super power made/make to others in your lives? Including people who don't even know they're being affected by it?

This came up regarding bravery, outspokenness, and also the skill of camouflage / shapeshifting / 'chameleonism' (which are all words for the skill that many non-binary folks have of adapting our appearance and mannerisms to fit into a variety of contexts). With all of these superpowers, we recognise their value and we also recognise their cost. We recognise that sometimes we access these superpowers because we want to, and sometimes we access these superpowers because we have to. We recognise that if we didn't face so much hostility and injustice related to our non-binary identity, we might never have needed some of these superpowers in the first place.

Shapeshifting is powerful, but it can have a high cost. It can be painful.

A few of the examples of times when we use a superpower because we must include:

- Seeing that older cisgender men treat people differently depending on their gender presentation, and knowing that a more masculine presentation will make it safer to stay involved in a cherished hobby. (The superpower of shapeshifting.)
- Realising that sometimes shifting even our personality can keep us safe in hostile contexts. Becoming quiet, and sometimes even feeling more anxious in response to an unsafe space and listening to that sense of unease. The quietness might not feel like who we really are, but camouflaging ourselves in that way can be helpful. (The superpower of camouflage.)
- Recognising that being visible and confrontational can open up space for other people who may not be able to be visible yet. Even when it's hard, sometimes we have to do this for each other, and for the people who can't. (The superpower of bravery.)

**WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU, TOO!**

**ARE THERE TIMES WHEN YOU ACCESS A NON-BINARY SUPERPOWER BECAUSE YOU MUST?**

**DOES IT FEEL DIFFERENT THAN WHEN YOU ACCESS A SUPERPOWER BECAUSE YOU WANT TO?**

**ARE THERE EVER TIMES WHEN THOSE TWO EXPERIENCES OVERLAP?**

## Who am I?

'It sucks not being able to instantly tell who you are.'

'It's hard questioning and not knowing.'

'I knew about unisex as a thing or a place that you can go where gender doesn't matter, but non-binary wasn't a thing.'

'I was just perceived as a stereotypical gay guy.'

Although many of us have come to an awareness of our non-binary identities and now hold that knowledge close, we recognise that lots of folks are still trying to figure it out. For each of us, the process of figuring out who we are took time!

This is true for folks who are cisgender, and for folks who have a binary gender, too, of course.

But for those of us who are non-binary, the process of answering 'who am I?' takes a few extra steps, because we don't fit into the accepted mainstream idea of gender.

## Being who I am: Non-binary identities

One of the strongest themes in our conversation was the idea of 'knowing who I am'.

This 'knowing who I am' is helpful in many ways.

For some of us, it supports us in being outspoken, standing up against expectations and demands that we conform to a gender binary. It allows us to say, 'screw this, deal with it!' It allows us to talk back to the harmful and restrictive ideas about gender that harm us and so many others. It allows us to stick up for ourselves and for others, even when it's hard.

Knowing who we are also helps us resist the pressure to provide proof to people who are choosing not to understand, because we can remind ourselves of the truth we know about ourselves whether they believe it or not.

'If you know yourself, it's easier to set your rules, set your boundaries.'

We would love to hear your story of finding the language that describes your identity, and we would love to hear what this makes possible in your life!

## Finding our own way

For many of us, finding our way to this knowledge has been a long process, without a lot of support in terms of media representations, social narratives, or cultural understanding.

Some of us find the language and understanding of our non-binary gender mostly on our own.

'It came into my head, the idea of being non-binary. It felt like there was a piece of me not there for a long time. I just sort of thought, hey, I'm non-binary, and that's it!'

'I don't feel like a girl. I don't know how it feels to be a girl. Trying to come up with an answer, this is where I've landed.'

## Finding the way together

For others of us, this process is collaborative, and we learn how to speak about our own experiences from our communities. (Our communities might include friends and family, pop culture figures, or even fictional characters.)

'Talking with each other about our experiences can make more things possible for each other. We can recognise things in ourselves that had no names previously.'

'Going through the process of transition together has "enabled us each to flourish", and has allowed me to realise where I really am. I would just have been the way I was, grappling uncomfortably with who I was.'

## Finding and creating safety

Safety was another strong theme in our conversation.

Safety takes many forms, and it is contextual – in a safe space, where we know that people will not make gendered assumptions about us and we feel free to express ourselves in a variety of ways, we can wear what we want, say what we're thinking, and feel the freedom to make mistakes, be uncertain, and be our whole complex selves.

Presentation can be a big part of feeling safe! Being able to wear what we want, whether it's a full beat face<sup>1</sup> or

just the right clothing item, goes a long way to helping us feel safe. And if someone is able to find us clothes that reflect who we are? Amazing. 'It's almost surreal when someone picks out a piece of clothing just right for your gender!'

Everything becomes possible when people treat me non-femme. I feel safe and accepted.

It takes time to develop the feeling of safety. Over time, and across many experiences, we start to find the people we can trust. Friend groups come together, sometimes connected by 'compounding weirdness' and shared experiences of being on the outside of expectations.

Safety doesn't mean that everyone in the space has to be perfectly well-informed – part of developing and experiencing safety in a group means holding space for learning, and for mistakes. In a safe space, we can 'know that if someone wants to be more inclusive, they are not trying to hurt you.'

We can build alliances on social media and in our schools and communities. Building these alliances happens through asking respectful questions and sharing knowledge. It's not about having all the answers, it's about finding them together.

And sometimes safety is about being away from other people.

Sometimes I just want to be out in the world, being myself, being by myself, not defined by others. People can make judgements even if they don't say anything, but plants don't have the ability to label you. When I'm out in nature I can go into a meditative space where I have no gender. I can shut off and go into a space where I can be myself.

This is a combination of stories, and not a direct quote.

## *Finding each other*

One of the best things about the conversation in Adelaide was realising the power of being in a room full of non-binary community.

'Everything was amazing. Everything is so rich in our community.'

'I learned that there are so many people going through the same stuff.'

'It's rare to hear the experience of someone who has had the same experience [as I have]. It's cathartic. Solidarity.'

'I owe it to everyone to do my bit.'

'We have a hard-won skill of making other people feel safe and comfortable to transcend the boxes they're pushed into.'

## *The Conversation in Calgary*

Gender is confusing! A Calgary participant starting us off with the real truth.

On 11th May 2019, a group of non-binary folks met in Calgary, Alberta to talk about these same topics and respond to the conversation in Adelaide.

The Calgary conversation was smaller, with just four participants including Tiffany as the facilitator. Despite this, it was a fantastic conversation with strong parallels to the Adelaide conversation and a few new themes that emerged.

And so, the long transcontinental conversation begins!

## *Creating Representation*

The conversation included a strong focus on representation.

We asked, 'How can we change society?'

And one answer that we arrived at was that we can bring more visibility to non-binary identities and binary identities, and binary identities and experiences. The expectation that non-binary folks will be the experts in everything to do with gender or to do with non-binary experience is unreasonable, and we hope that by creating content that tells a variety of non-binary stories, we can start to build understanding and reduce the pressure on non-binary individuals.

We asked, 'How can we create a narrative that allows an opening and a change?'

We've shared a few ideas in this document, and we'd love to hear from you, too!



## Labels, Narratives, and Superpowers of Naming and Knowing

One of the real similarities between the conversation in Adelaide and the conversation in Calgary was the recurring theme of discussing how challenging it can be to get to know ourselves when we do not see ourselves represented in the world around us.

We identified a superpower of 'choosing those labels that make you feel empowered and letting go of the others.' (Choosing labels includes the superpower of choosing no labels!)

This is a superpower because it allows us to move through a world that insists on labels at every turn – as one participant said, 'in English, if you don't have a label, you don't exist' – without compromising our own identities or selves.

Like many superpowers, this one is complicated, and it often develops in contexts of pain, and confusion.

'Rejecting labels was easier for me, even though labels are very cultural and in English, if you don't have a label, you don't exist.'

'Not being labelled 'woman' or 'lady' makes my world possible.'

'If people don't put a label on me, I just exist as myself.'

'In your head, you don't have to think of yourself as either a man or a woman, you can just live how you are.'

'It's a superpower of learning to be non-binary. Just being who we are.'

This superpower of learning who we are, and learning how to tell ourselves and others the story of who we are, is a survival skill.

It allows us to reject the narratives that other people push onto us. But it's also a lot of work. It takes effort to find the labels, the language, the stories of self.

'Hearing conversations that talk about us as if we don't exist is painful.'

'There is a lot of work in reminding myself that I exist, and that it's okay for me to exist.'

## Research

'I just need to be me, so I need to find those places where I'm happy and healthy.'

For many of us, part of our journey included becoming uncomfortable with gender, and then researching to try and find different genders. We were searching for the places where we are happy and healthy; the places where we can know ourselves, and know that we exist, that we are not wrong about our own experiences and selves.

This is why representation emerged as such a strong theme – when other non-binary folks start searching, we want them to be able to find a variety of stories. We want them to be able to find our stories, and stories of people in the non-binary community who have a wide range of experiences. We want them to know that there is not just one way to be non-binary, and that whatever choices they make, it's okay.

This is especially true because when we can't find the stories of non-binary existence that reflect our own, or that resonate for us, what we find instead are painful labels and identities that just don't fit.

Some of us had the experience of trying to find out what it means to be a woman, and knowing that it isn't the right fit, can be incredibly painful. And when we're also not a man, what does that mean?

Gender is far more diverse than we currently see. Stop pushing 'men always do this' and 'women always do that' – allow people to do what they want!

Unhook actions from gender, so that people can be who they are.

Part of the 'research' often includes learning how to discern what's good for you and what's not. Learning how to keep pieces from different 'gender stories' that work for you, and to let go of the rest.

You might be a non-binary person who was assigned female at birth, who likes feminine clothes, and that's okay! You might be a non-binary person who was assigned male at birth, who likes cars and enjoys having a beard. You are allowed to like things that align with your assigned sex without that being an invalidation or betrayal of your non-binary gender. But for many of us, learning that this is true required a lot of time researching our own selves, and finding other non-binary folks who could show us the way.

Although it's not right that non-binary folks are expected to be experts in everything to do with gender, the fact is that many of us are!

## *Learning to forgive (ourselves and others)*

Is forgiveness a superpower?

Maybe.

It's definitely a complicated superpower, if it is.

For folks who are being marginalised and oppressed, who are being harmed by powerful systems and structures like binary gender, white supremacy, misogyny, ableism, and so many others, being told to 'forgive' can be yet another form of violence.

The demand for forgiveness can act as an invalidation of our anger, our pain, and our struggles.

And yet, we identified this as a superpower for many of us, because forgiveness has been tied to our own well-being.

The superpower of forgiveness is tied to the ability to recognise when something is wrong. Learning to see that we deserve to exist as we are, and to have our identities respected, means that we start to notice when our identities are not being respected. We learn when and how to correct folks, and we learn to stand up for ourselves when it is safe.

## *Listen to non-binary people!*

'I think we would all benefit from exploring gender.' (Even if it turns out that you are cisgender!)

'Society as a whole can learn a lot from transgender people, because we know a lot about society.'

Because society was not built for us, we've had to learn how to be in this society without taking it on. This means that we have had to pay attention to how gender works in a way that many cisgender folks have not.

'Lots of people don't know about non-binary [identities].'

'People want to be inclusive, but they don't have an understanding of how it feels to be in a world that is so shaped by man and woman.'

'It makes sense when people struggle... narratives and worldviews sometimes collide.'

Listening to our stories can help other non-binary people like us, but it can also help people who are not non-binary. Not only can learning about non-binary identities and experiences help someone be more inclusive, it can also help them explore their own gender. And that's good for everyone!

Many of us also learn to avoid unsafe or unwelcoming spaces when we don't have the energy to correct people over and over, and we also don't have the energy to handle the constant misgendering. As one participant said, 'If I am too much in this world, it is bad for me'. Retreating, finding time alone and space to escape the constant pressure of binary gender is valuable.

Despite all these pressures and the constant labelling, we recognise that there are people who want to be inclusive.

There are people who make mistakes without being malicious, and there are people who are trying but haven't found the language, or haven't quite grasped what non-binary identities are about. Sometimes, when we are able to forgive these folks, we can 'build a bridge to mainstream society.'

But we want to be very clear about this – it is not our responsibility or our obligation to forgive when we have been hurt. We do not want to contribute to any marginalised person feeling like they have to forgive everyone who hurts them. And we recognise that for many folks, the violence and pain starts long before we even come out.

Just like choosing a label (including choosing no label!) is one of our superpowers, choosing whether to forgive (including choosing not to!) is, too.

## *Forgiving ourselves when we misgender ourselves*

Many of us have had the experience of misgendering ourselves, either in our own thoughts or in our conversations. This is most common when we use gendered words to describe ourselves (especially words that we grew up using and hearing, like 'daughter'), but it happens in other ways, too. Here are some of the ways we work through the feelings of shame, anxiety, and hurt when we misgender ourselves:

- Working with our inner child, we can recognise the hurt that sometimes grew over many of years of not having language or stories for our non-binary selves. We can apologise for misgendering our young selves for so long and remind ourselves that we are welcome here.
- Finding a symbol that grounds us in our non-binary gender and reminds us who we are.
- Remembering that 'this is the work we need to do so that the world changes'. By living our lives, and learning our stories, and fumbling our way through this difficult process of learning who we are, and how to talk about who we are, we make other stories possible for everyone around us.

## *The work we need to do so that the world changes'*

So, what's next?

So much of the Calgary conversation was about what needs to happen so that the dangerous and unhelpful narratives that exist around gender can be re-authored, so that people have more freedom and more possibility.

We want to help make it easier for people to speak with friends and family about non-binary experiences, but we also want to make a difference for community members who are trying to talk with medical and mental health professionals, or with co-workers or employers, or with other people who have power in our lives. We want to make it easier for parents to speak with children, and for children to speak with parents and teachers.

We want more representation, so that when someone asks, 'what am I? who am I? how can I get through this world?' they can find some ways forward.

This work will include finding ways to create more publicity for non-binary people.

In particular, we want to share the idea that it's okay to feel the way that you feel, and that there are a variety of genders.

We want to share that it is common, and it does not invalidate your gender, if you have a sense of inner conflict between internal gender expression (how we feel about ourselves and how we view ourselves in our own minds) and external gender expression (how we present ourselves to the world). This includes talking about clothing options, and how you can wear whatever you

want and it doesn't determine (or invalidate) your gender identity.

We know that having a different perspective makes it easier to stand up; if you feel that you're the only one who feels the way you feel, it can be hard to know how to start a conversation or how to stand up for yourself.

We want to create non-binary representation that helps build bridges within our community and beyond it.

Some of the ideas and projects that we will be exploring over the next year include:

- A video series featuring a variety of non-binary folks, to show people visual representations of our many identities. (We are particularly interested in visually countering the idea that all non-binary people are young, thin, white, abled, and androgynous in a vaguely masculine kind of way. This doesn't reflect the reality of our community!)
- A series of zines that allow folks who don't want to be in a video to share their stories of diverse non-binary experiences.
- A booklet pulling together our 'how to stand up for yourself' skills, with strategies for responding when you are misgendered in different circumstances.
- A booklet specifically for binary folks who want to know how to support us, and how to help us feel included.
- A small pamphlet that folks can use when they want to communicate their identity to a new person, or to share information about their identity with someone.

We would love to hear your ideas, too! What kind of representation do you want to see? What kinds of resources would be helpful for you? Send us an email at: [sostarselfcare@gmail.com](mailto:sostarselfcare@gmail.com)

## *What's next for the non-binary discussion group?*

Our plan is that the two groups will continue to meet monthly in both Adelaide, South Australia and Calgary, Alberta for the rest of 2019. Although we will not be creating a document like this for every meeting, we will be taking notes and responding to each other's stories and ideas, and this will not be the only resource created.



Would you like to start a companion group where you are? We would love that!

You can reach Tiffany at: [sostarsselfcare@gmail.com](mailto:sostarsselfcare@gmail.com) and Rosie at: [RosieM@unitingcommunities.org](mailto:RosieM@unitingcommunities.org).

If you're in Calgary or Adelaide and want to come to a discussion, get in touch and we'll let you know when the next one is happening!

If you'd like to respond to any of the stories or ideas shared here, we would love to hear from you.

## Note

1. 'Full beat face' is a term that's been used for decades in the beauty industry to describe perfectly applied makeup. Tatiana Ward (@beatfacehoney) says, 'A 'beat face' means your makeup is extraordinary from top to bottom. It means that whoever did your makeup did it really well or, if you did your own makeup, it looks amazing.'



## Dear Reader

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