

Exploring the Gender (Non)Binary



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BACKGROUND

While 2SLGBTQ+ identities are becoming increasingly accepted and understood globally, there is still little representation and understanding of those who identify as a gender other than male or female (Stachowiak, 2017). Non-binary and genderqueer are terms that are used to describe any individual who identifies as some gender or no gender other than male or female (Richards et al., 2016). Non-binary gender identities can take many forms, from experiencing multiple genders at once, to no gender, to experiencing some affinity for a gender at some points in time, and there is no one way to experience or express non-binary gender identities (Richards et al., 2016). Many non-Western societies had more gender fluidity before colonization. These countries may be regarded as misogynistic and as dangerous places for queer folks but many became that way due to the intervention of Western colonizers (Hussain, 2019). The arts often provide opportunities for individuals to experiment with their gender and become affirmed in their gender identity. This research focused on the experiences of two non-binary public icons: ALOK, a gender non-conforming mixed-media artist of Indian descent who uses they/them pronouns and is a performer, public speaker, writer, and influencer and Jonathan Van Ness (JVN), a non-binary influencer, host on Queer Eye, and the Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness podcast and uses he/him or they/them pronouns ("Getting Curious", 2019).

PURPOSE & OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this project will be to explore the experiences of ALOK, a gender non-conforming mixed-media artist of colour, and Jonathan Van Ness (JVN), a white settler non-binary TV star on Queer Eye and influencer using a podcast transcript from Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness of a conversation between JVN and ALOK. This will be done through the following objectives:

- > Explore what stories and narratives ALOK and JVN use to describe their experiences as non-binary people.
- > Examine how those narratives construct their queer identities through an intersectional lens.

- > Compare the experiences of ALOK and JVN with the gender binary and identify shared and opposing themes.



Image caption: Jonathan Van Ness posing in a purple dress. Image source: Gay Times Magazine.

METHODS

This research was grounded in a narrative analysis approach to qualitative research through a constructivist lens aiming at understanding lived experiences (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006).

- > Queer narratology → examines narratives of openly queer narrators and how they describe their identity (Lanser, 2018)
 - > Critical narrative analysis considers my influence as a non-binary researcher on my interpretations of the data and findings (Hickson, 2015)
 - > Grounded in queer and non-binary genderqueer theory that challenges the binary notions of male/female gender categories and counters prejudice towards trans, queer, and gender non-conforming peoples (Monro, 2019; Brintall, 2021; de Lauretis, 1991)
- Analysis using NVivo 12 pro digital qualitative data analysis and management software:**
- > Coded "I", "We", "They", and "You" statements →
 - > Inductively coded the excerpts in first coding round based on themes relating to JVN and ALOK's experiences →
 - > Wrote found poetry based on narrative analysis of the codes (Patrick, 2016) for objectives 1 & 2
 - > Results are presented through Found Poetry in which the researcher created poetry out of the words of ALOK and JVN in the interview transcript to highlight the similarities and differences in their experiences (Patrick, L.D., 2016)



Image caption: ALOK posing on a couch in a purple, patterned dress. Image source: <https://www.alokymenon.com/#new-page>

FINDINGS

Found Poem 1: the stories and narratives JVN and ALOK use to describe their coming out and live experiences as non-binary people:

Everything for me is heightened
It's gonna be epic.
So many signals around
Terrified
You've always been this way
What's new,
Is the language.

The stage
Allows us to cry
And laugh
Challenging the gender binary
With as many genders as there are
People in the world.

I just didn't know
We had a name.
I just remember
Being torn out of dresses
Referring to myself as a he or a she.

It's kind of a feeling
I've never felt beholden to that binary
I always felt that I fit outside of it.
It wasn't really for me.

You can use he, they can use they, she can use she
It's totally legit and wonderful to be non-binary.

DISCUSSION

JVN and ALOK's narratives of their experiences as non-binary people were similar in many ways: they both grew up in rural United States; their childhood majorly defined their coming out process; and they are both public figures who are both facing backlash and appreciation for their gender expression. ALOK's story, however, starts centuries before their birth in the traditional nonbinary history of India and other non-Western societies (Hussain, 2019). Both their experiences involved components of:

- > Emotional pain and trauma due to violence, internalized transphobia, and colonization resonant of experiences identified by queer theory (Brintall, 2021)
- > Many "othering" experiences due to bullying, societal expectations, and families (Blair et al., 2019)
- > Not being accepted by the queer community for not being the "right" kind of trans or gay (binary trans, white, gender normative) (Stone et al., 2019)

Found poem 2 exploring the construction of their queer identities:

It's like such a rigid,
Ridiculous
Unrealistic standards,
Into man and
I was not allowed.
I was scared.
I just did not know it was even possible,
There's never any Indian people who are LGBTQ+
So I was like,
I was made into this scary figure,
Everyone is staring at me,
I don't feel safe.
It doesn't stop.
Every. Single. Day.
You're too much.
They say.

So rigid,
Problem.
People divided.
woman.
This is not a fad.
That's a white people thing.
People spit
Laugh
Yell
Film
Push
Shove
Attack
Harass,
Target
Violence
Bully
Hurt
Trauma
Pain

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