**Towards Nonbinary Rhetoric: Navigating Discomfort in a Binary Society**

As a graduate student who identifies as nonbinary, upon starting this project, I was intrigued to see what academia had to say about this gender identity. Despite the long history of individuals who did not conform to the gender binary, nonbinarism seems to still be emerging in scholarly work. Society is learning to grapple with us and the normalization of the change we represent. With growing numbers of people identifying as enbies, or nonbinary people, I can imagine our acceptance will become more prominent in society. Nonbinary rhetoric is part of our history, which is made daily, and should be explored not only as part of queer rhetoric, but as its own field.

In this thesis, I plan to help construct nonbinary rhetoric by looking at materials informing and discussing nonbinary experiences, my own included, regarding the discomfort, including **enbyphobia**, nonbinary people encounter simply by existing. I will discuss how nonbinary people navigate this discomfort through guides on **passing, coming out** and **transitioning**, as rhetorically informed strategies.

First, I will put together a definition of what I, as a nonbinary person, consider “nonbinary” to mean and will consider its contrast to the common gender binary in our society. Then, I will look for sources both by and for nonbinary people that depict to their audiences a method or experience of action that reflects what I consider to be relevant to the definition of nonbinary and pick up on the methods of handling discomfort. I will evaluate the sources based on a set of topical criteria. Criteria includes a clearly communicated interpretation of being nonbinary, thoughts on passing, coming out, transitioning, and/or enbyphobia, as well as the description of discomfort felt either by the nonbinary person or the people around them in a given context. Sources will include personal texts written by nonbinary people, such as memoirs, a TED Talk, and an article depicting one enby’s personal uncomfortable experiences. By referencing these, I aim to convey a more general image of what it is like to be nonbinary, not just my own lived experiences. Other sources I analyze will be written with the intention to guide enbies to aid them in the discomfort they interact with in life. This includes a pamphlet on coming out, an interactive workbook on resilience in queer people and a book that allows the reader to explore their gender. By using these sources, I hope to build a basis of nonbinary rhetoric.

. I will then reflect on my own experiences and create an autoethnography that I believe accurately depicts my experience as a nonbinary person in a society that is still binary-centric. Based upon a rhetorical analysis, I will include thoughts on the actions of passing, coming out, transitioning and enbyphobia, including my experiences with the different methods in different settings in my life.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

While the definitions and applications of the nonbinary identity are currently thriving in our society, the concept can still be considered a “new” or “emerging” topic when it comes to scholarly research. While there has been an increase in the interest of transgender studies and/or their medical-related content, this thesis is focused specifically on the nonbinary identities, the issues nonbinary people face socially, and the discourses surrounding these issues. This perspective allows me to build upon queer rhetoric, discomfort and normality, and the concept of the rhetorical situation to contribute in a scholarly direction that has not yet been explored with adequate depth.

**Queer Rhetoric**

Queer rhetoric drives much of my analysis. As acceptance of queer culture is being normalized, both the LGBTQ+-related and academia-related views on queer theory are being explored regarding being nonbinary. In his article “Queering the Writing Center,” Harry Denny writes that queer people “integrate with larger society, making strategic decisions about when to invoke our identities and experiences and when to proselytize about who we are” (107). Denny also says that queer activists and scholars practice queer theory intending to “to demystify and de-naturalize structuring dynamics” (107). This highlights that the integration of what of is being queered is constantly in relation to the outside majority. In the case of this thesis, that subject is queer nonbinary people and the materials produced regarding their identity. There are three main terms associated with managing one’s nonbinary identity: passing, coming out, and transitioning. They are closely intertwined as discussed by Denny, who gives pros and cons of coming out and passing (112) and Planned Parenthood, in their guide “What Do I Need to Know About Transitioning?” which gives information about transitioning both medically and socially. The three terms are key elements to understanding the nonbinary identity.

One hurdle that many nonbinary individuals face is the issue of coming out; this can look very different as there are unique situations for each person. Denny writes that there is strategy involved in the process of coming out and that some enbies are in safer positions in others. He compares this to the physical identifiers that other minorities, such as people of color and women, must navigate (107). The individual’s outward presentation is directly related to passing; the better someone passes, the less likely they may feel they need to come out or take steps to transition. Passing can be both a luxury and a survival tactic, depending on the context and rhetorical situation. Additionally, while coming out is ideally on the enby’s own terms, there are times where they are forced into the situation. Furthermore, transitioning aids trans people, including enbies, in the process of becoming comfortable in specific environments and spaces.

Sari L. Reisner and Jaclyn M. W. Hughto’s “Comparing the Health of Non-Binary and Binary Transgender Adults in a Statewide Non-Probability Sample” specifies some differences between (binary) transgender and nonbinary populations. This includes the idea that nonbinary individuals “may have an identity and/or expression that is either feminine or masculine, both feminine and masculine, or neither” (Reisner and Hughto) while trans individuals often identify within the gender binary. The distinctions and overlap between the two helps define the discomfort felt by others, including in the form of transphobia. In some cases, transphobia is studied as inclusive of binary and nonbinary transgender people such as in Salem State University’s “Anti-Oppression: Anti-Transphobia,” which specifies that transphobia is “systemized discrimination or antagonism directed against transgender/nonbinary/genderqueer/agender persons” due to “a desire to maintain the gender binary.” This informs the definition of transphobia which leads to my delivery of a working definition of enbyphobiawhich is more specific to nonbinary people.

Queer rhetoric is increasingly becoming a subject of focus in rhetorical studies. GPat Patterson writes in the introduction of the 2020 trans edition of *Peitho*, which is called “Because Trans People Are Speaking: Notes on Our Field’s First Special Issue on Transgender Rhetorics,” that trans (including nonbinary) people are simply speaking, which on the most basic level makes their presence and work in society rhetorical. Patterson says that “trans people are crafting arguments that, quite frankly, need listened to, because cis culture’s profound lack of imagination about the ways gender is weaponized and racialized doesn’t just result in terrible arguments—it results in danger, precarity, and soul murder for gender-expansive people” (Patterson). The relevance of the way nonbinary people oppose the gender binary is important as it creates discomfort that can prompt serious results.

In “Queer Rhetoric in Situ” Jean Bessette defines the concept of heteronormativity and its prominence in social life (150) and discusses how queer is seen not necessarily positively. It can be seen as being so far from normal that it is sometimes seen negatively as “antinormative” (151). Similarly, the term “nonbinary” is sometimes defined as being anti-gender or a third gender. The definitions of these two terms focus on what each given identity is not, rather than what it is. Due to this lack of acknowledgement, enbies sometimes feel “not trans enough” or “not nonbinary enough” to claim the label. However, Bessette writes “a single act can be both queer and normative” (italics in original, 156), just as how a person can be nonbinary and normative. The concept of normality regarding being nonbinary is dependent on what the individual feels is “normal.” There is no one true way to be “normal,” and acceptance can be achieved in a variety of actions to support nonbinary individuals. Reaching an ideal environment that uplifts enbies with equity is dependent on what is considered acceptable by the dominant culture. In “Queer Feelings,” a chapter of her book, The Cultural Politics of Emotion, Sara Ahmed defines what queer ideality looks like for queer theorists:

For queer theorists, it is hence important that queer lives do not follow the scripts of heteronormative culture: that they do not become, in Halberstam’s term, “homonormative” lives. Such lives would not desire access to comfort; they would not have families, get married, settle down into unthinking coupledom, give birth to and raise children, join neighborhood watch, or pray for the nation in times of war. Each of these acts would “support” the ideals that script such lives as queer, failed, and unlivable in the first place. (149)

Indeed, the way in which queer lives are accepted brings up controversy and for some, discomfort. If the acceptance a group wants is coming from a party they are trying not to emulate, do they truly want that acceptance from those people? This is especially pertinent when the party is oppressive or others the group seeking acceptance. The pressures and restraints on what is socially acceptable are a burden nonbinary people face daily. Success would be the freedom to live their most authentic selves, but realistically, that often comes with judgement, exclusion, and violence. Would the binary members of society accept the enbies because they have expanded tolerance to what they consider monumental differences? Or would the acceptance come only after they find enough similarities to feel comfortable? Are they willing to do either of these? Will enbies ever be able to be their true, authentic self at all times?

This group of sources contributes to the understanding of what it means to be queer, transgender, and more specifically, what it means to be nonbinary. It begins the discussion on the ways in which nonbinary people act upon the discomfort they may face and actions they take to maneuver through those feelings.

**Nonbinary (Dis)Comfort and the Rhetorical Situation**

Rhetorical analysis can illuminate standards made by society and the comfort or discomfort nonbinary people face when deciding if they are going to follow those standards. The scholarship reviewed here also discusses the important concepts of nonbinary people feeling uncomfortable in certain spaces as well as society feeling uncomfortable with the nonbinary gender. It highlights the concept of binaries and contrast in spaces and how this is something enbies have to work through. Joshua Chambers-Letson notes in his chapter of Keywords for Gender and Sexuality Studies, called “Identity,” that when identity becomes a sense of selfsameness with like people, the separation between self and other increases and becomes problematic; this may lead to inequality in key aspects of life including money, power, knowledge, resources etc (117). This lack of balance places one identity group as one with greater acceptance and importance, while demoting and suppressing the other. In this context, it is binary and nonbinary people, respectively. This imbalance seeps into many parts of society and firmly supports the idea that being nonbinary is not “normal,” which feeds into negative mindsets that lead to some spaces to being uncomfortable.

Ahmed discusses her discomfort in heteronormative spaces to explain rhetoric’s role in the experience of being in spaces that do or do not welcome queer people. This includes restrictions in social spaces in which queer people are asked to not make straight people uncomfortable with their public affection (148). This othering of anything that is not heteronormative applies discomfort to nonbinary people; they often feel this social pressure in everyday spaces as compared to their comfort levels in accepting spaces. This feeds into the internal debate about passing versus coming out in these spaces.

To help understand how nonbinary discourses may be situational, I turn to the concept of the rhetorical situation. The rhetorical situation is a fundamental part of writing and communicating effectively. Jeffrey and Zickel write about the five parts: author, audience, setting, purpose, and text. Their chapter, “What is the Rhetorical Situation?” focuses on the importance of these aspects while putting the information into layman’s terms, which I found to be a helpful review as well as a solid foundation. Another valuable resource was Lloyd Bitzer’s “The Rhetorical Situation.” This source broke down key details of rhetorical situations regarding subjects such as rhetorical discourse and exigence. Exigence can be seen as a catalyst that prompts authors to create their texts. This term can be defined in more detail as an urgent occasion for writing through which can lead to change carried out by the audience, as shown on the “Supplement 1 – Rhetorical Situation Poster” by College Composition and Communication. This source provided, in my opinion, the most palatable definition, which greatly aided in my understanding. Applying a theory of the rhetorical situation to nonbinary discourse can demonstrate its occasions, possibilities and constraints.

In Jenny Edbauer’s piece, “Unframing Models of Public Distribution: From Rhetorical Situation to Rhetorical Ecologies,” she explores the variety of interpretations of the phrase “Keep Austin Weird” and follows the correlating connotations. This theory of ecologies informs a wider analysis of the rhetorical situation informs and supports my analysis of nonbinary rhetoric and discomfort by prompting me to look beyond the immediate rhetorical situation and into other associations. Together, these resources proved to provide ample explanation of key terms that build rhetorical situations and their relevance in the larger picture of communication and articulation. In doing this, they incorporate context that allows for other associations and a deeper understanding as related to outside connotations. An understanding of rhetorical situations is important as I analyze nonbinary rhetorical strategies in context as well as the creation and experience of uncomfortable nonbinary situations.

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

While observing discomfort experienced both by and regarding nonbinary people, I collected many ideas that came from my own experiences and those of others who identify as nonbinary. While looking at these texts and relating them to different types of rhetoric, I found that while there is much to be said about queer rhetoric, the same depth of exploration is not evident in nonbinary rhetoric. This led me to the following questions:

**Primary Question**:

* Given interest in queer rhetoric and the lack of nonbinary rhetoric, what might a theory of nonbinary rhetoric look like?

**Secondary Questions:**

* How do online guides aid people, including nonbinary people, to face discomfort in society? How does this correspond with contemporary rhetorical theory, especially around identity and rhetorical action?
* How do nonbinary writers describe their navigation of uncomfortable situations? How are these situations rhetorically created for nonbinary people?
* How might one understand nonbinary rhetoric in reflecting on one’s own life and experience in situations that highlight nonbinary identity and discomfort?

**METHODOLOGY**

To address these questions, I will first conduct a rhetorical analysis of texts written by others. When looking for personal texts written by nonbinary individuals, I will be identifying the references to passing, coming out, and transitioning. I will also be searching for actions that indicate discomfort, either on the side of the enby or society, as well as enbyphobia. I will look for messages and depictions of what I believe are relatable and relevant based on my own life experiences and those of other enbies I know. While reading these texts, I will highlight and make notes about the portions of the text that describe uncomfortable situation and the writers’ experiences in those situations. Then, I will analyze the references to provide insight into nonbinary experiences and their construction and communication. Using this material, I will construct a rhetorical understanding about how the feelings and actions are discussed within the selected texts.

While reading documents written to guide nonbinary people, I will analyze the material for a few key ideas. First, I will look for how these guides recognize rhetorical qualities of nonbinary identity and communication. Elements may be related to what to say, who to talk to, outward appearance, and the fact that gender is socially coded in our society. I will highlight and make note of these important moments in the texts. Additionally, I will look for how these sources arm enbies to prepare for the discomfort they may face in society and, potentially, internally using this rhetorical information. I will consider how the instances of discomfort impact the advice these documents give. Specifically, I will look for the advice given regarding passing, coming out, and transitioning, and will consider how this advice is rhetorical in nature.

Then, I plan to create an autoethnography composed of my own experiences. Since my research is based on the experiences of nonbinary people and I identify as a nonbinary person, I believe autoethnography is the best research method to use as it allows the writer to discuss their experiences as related to a group they are a part of. I choose to use my own life so that I can find and expand on details that are directly related to the material in my analysis. It also allows me more flexibility and ease of access to materials. Additionally, situating myself in the research is beneficial because it encourages the audience to learn from a direct source, giving them authentic answers and increasing my credibility as a writer.

To do this, I will be revisiting an autoethnography that was originally intended to be the final production for a class called Autoethnography. The piece was to represent the knowledge I had collected throughout the course about effective autoethnographies as well as fit the definition of autoethnography built by the class. I will adapt and change it to more closely align with the themes discussed in my thesis. I am anticipating having to rewrite and revise a significant portion of the text. Part of this process includes restructuring current material, adding new material, notably a section related to enbyphobia--- including my reaction to an anti-trans political promotion, and removing portions that focus on tangential material. All ideas are intended to link back to nonbinary rhetoric and the core ideas of passing, coming out, transitioning, discomfort, and enbyphobia.

**CHAPTER OVERVIEW AND TIMELINE**

**Introduction, Nonbinary Definition and Glossary** (finish by end of November)

The introduction and definition of “nonbinary” serves to introduce the audience to the content matter. First, the introduction will include important information behind my work such as literature review and the significance of the project. Following, I explain an overview of the definition I will use, background behind it and my reason of interest. This section also includes a glossary, as I want all readers to be able to read and comprehend my work regardless of their knowledge regarding LGBTQ+ terminology, be it extensive or limited.

**Chapter 1** (finish by end of December)

The first chapter focuses on personal texts written by nonbinary people; I chose to look at an article from *The Cut* called “They, Then and Now” by Brock Colyar. This article discusses Colyar’s experiences regarding coming out partially by disclosing their pronouns and the discomfort they have faced as well as discomfort other people have expressed as a response. The piece also delves into the reasoning behind the discomfort, which is the lack of gender conformity clashing with societal pressure for internal discomfort. External discomfort often stems from people trying to stay woke, but not always for the right reasons, or transphobia and enbyphobia. There are also mentions of a lack of passing within Colyar and others’ gender expression and how this prompts people to ask them about their pronouns, playing into the cycle of discomfort. I will consider how this text contributes to nonbinary rhetoric

Another valuable resource I found was *Nonbinary Memoirs of Gender and Identity* edited by Micah Rajunov and Scott Duane. I selected moments from “Part One: What is Gender?” to highlight moments in which the nonbinary writers featured in the collection discuss what it means to pass and come out, as well as how they chose (or did not get to choose) the way those things occurred. For example, passing is not always something to be desired and coming out does not always happen the way individuals wish it to. Each of the quotes I have pulled will illustrate the writers’ personal stories, building a multi-perspective approach to nonbinary rhetoric.

I also chose to analyze a TED Talk by Sage Skyler called “A Nonbinary Transition.” In this presentation, Skyler focuses on the process of transitioning, including social and medical aspects. These qualities tie strongly with a nonbinary person’s (dis)comfort regarding their appearance and presence as they transition while facing pressure from society while trying to accurately represent their gender identity. Skyler also relates this topic to their audience by discussing multiple forms of transitioning, such as transitions everyone faces during their life like moving up a grade in school or cutting one’s hair. This source provides material related to discomfort, transitioning, and passing. I will analyze this content based on how rhetoric is used to inform the audience about nonbinary transition and how transition itself is constructed as intentionally rhetorical.

The purpose of this chapter is to inform the audience of experiences of nonbinarism directly from credible sources. It is also to investigate how rhetorical analysis of sources contributes to the understanding of personal experiences given their authors, context, and effectiveness.

**Chapter 2** (finish by end of December)

The second chapter focuses on guides written to help and empower nonbinary people. The first text for this section will be *How to Understand Your Gender: A Practical Guide for Exploring Who You Are* by Alex Iantaffi and Meg-John Barker. This book not only explicitly explores what gender is, but how it relates to others and how it can help people relate to others, such as in sections six and seven titled “Gender, Relationships, and Sexuality” and “Gender Pioneers and Gender Warriors,” respectively. It also dives into ways gender appears in our society such as in gender stereotypes, telling one’s gender story and identity intersections, gendered words and descriptors, gender as related to bodies and expression, etc. This source will solidify the ways gender is coded in our society and the ways gender is currently, and can potentially, be viewed.

Another text is *The Queer and Transgender Resilience Workbook: Skills for Navigating Sexual Orientation & Gender Expression.* This workbook contains information and encouraging words to aid in equipping queer readers to face the discomfort they may feel caused by both internal and external forces as they come into their identity. The workbook allows users to explore discomfort and to sit with their own thoughts as it touches on topics such as coming out and passing without explicitly mentioning them. Some of the aspects related to nonbinarism that this source does mention are microaggressions, ownership of identity, and self-esteem. I will look at the rhetorical importance of internalizing these concepts and how they might affect enbies on a regular basis, especially through the book’s questions and activities.

I will also analyze the Human Rights Campaign’s *Coming Out: Living Authentically as Transgender or Non-Binary,* which provides information and guidance regarding coming out and transitioning. The information is filled with chapters on topics such as what it means to be trans or nonbinary, telling others, making a disclosure plan, coming out, transitioning, etc. The specifics given are written in an empowering way that both informs and advises the nonbinary (and other transgender) readers. This text allows for a greater conversation about different rhetorical situations involved in the process of coming into one’s identity.

The purpose of this chapter is to inform the audience of how allying organizations and entities empower nonbinary people to live their lives and endure and handle the discomfort they may face daily. It is also to build nonbinary rhetoric by discussing rhetorical aspects like the situations, moments and decisions surrounding nonbinarism. Many of them overlap with queer rhetoric, whereas others are more specific to nonbinary people such as enbyphobia and call for related support.

**Chapter 3** (finish by end of January)

The third text I am looking at is an autoethnography I wrote. The purpose of including it is to offer my own perspective on nonbinarism, as someone who identifies with the label “nonbinary.” I intend to explain my thoughts, supported with tales of my real-life experiences, regarding discomfort like enbyphobia as well as passing, coming out, and transitioning. Additionally, there are images in the piece, as well as a hyperlink, making this chapter of the thesis multimodal. The purpose of these parts is to show not just in text, but in images and video, the significance of expression of nonbinary gender and the effects of antagonizing nonbinary people, respectively. As a unit, I aim for this chapter to contribute to nonbinary rhetoric by highlighting areas of self-expression and tension surrounding nonbinary discomfort.

**Conclusion** (finish by end of February)

Nonbinary rhetoric is worth studying to help support the growth of LGBTQ+, and therefore, nonbinary populations. Generation Z has been identified as the generation with the largest percentage of people identifying as LGBTQ+, and numbers are expected to increase as society becomes more accepting. Controversially, anti-trans legislature is increasing contributing to a large divide in the beliefs of those living in the United States. Studying nonbinary rhetoric has the potential to invest in both nonbinary and American history as it is built each day.

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