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## Review of Nonbinary Gender Identities: History, Culture, Resources

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Charlie McNabb, *Nonbinary Gender Identities: History, Culture, Resources*. Lanham: MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018.

Over the past several years, the rights of transgender and nonbinary individuals have been in the news. The most vitriolic debates have focused on bathroom access. In the United States, local and state lawmakers have proposed a range of bills that would require people to use the bathroom that corresponds with the sex listed on their birth certificate. The struggle over so-called bathroom bills is only one part of the fight to expand—or restrict—the rights of transgender and nonbinary people. At this precarious moment for gender-variant individuals comes Charlie McNabb’s *Nonbinary Gender Identity: History, Culture, Resources*. McNabb, a folklorist, archivist, librarian, and queer activist, offers a strong introduction to definitions, histories, and cultures of nonbinary individuals. In addition, McNabb provides scholars, archivists, librarians, and teachers with a treasure-trove of resources to learn about, and research, the history and contemporary experiences of nonbinary people.

McNabb separates their book into two parts. In the first, they cover a range of topics, including: nonbinary visibility in the United States; culturally specific genders; nonbinary genders in popular culture; and notable nonbinary people. For those unfamiliar with nonbinary gender identities, McNabb explains that nonbinary is an umbrella term to describe individuals who do not identify as exclusively male or female. McNabb offers a quick, though useful, overview of how identity terms changed over the course of the twentieth century. This included a shift away from the midcentury use of “transsexual” to describe those who were unhappy as a member of the sex, or gender, they were assigned at birth. As McNabb documents, the use of the term “transgender” became popular in the 1990s. Over the past two decades, as gender identities have become more diverse, the term nonbinary has grown more popular, especially since it is, according to McNabb, a neutral label that indicates gender variance outside the binary model of male and female.

McNabb provides short introductions to nonbinary histories in the United States in the second chapter. McNabb’s overview discusses Christine Jorgensen, who underwent a sex change operation in the 1950s and subsequently became the subject of popular media attention, and trans activism in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s. Importantly, McNabb stresses that trans activism has neither been monolithic nor found immediate support among mainstream feminist and/or gay rights organizations. In the present day, there remains some confusion over prominent nonbinary rights issues. McNabb emphasizes nonbinary activism against data systems, such as those pertaining to healthcare, government, and school, that presume a binary gender identity; bathroom usage; and the importance of language, like employing the pronouns nonbinary individuals prefer. This overview borrows heavily from well-known historical monographs, like Joanne Meyerowitz’s *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States*.<sup>1</sup>

The third chapter examines culturally specific genders in the Americas, Polynesia, India, and Southeast Asia. McNabb has a strong section on European colonialism and the ways in which European conquest and imperialism pathologized cultures that had, at one time, valued nonbinary individuals. McNabb stresses the harm done by Spanish conquistadors and early

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<sup>1</sup> Joanne Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

anthropologists. Although centuries separated these European actors, both wrote extensively on a group they labeled *berdache*. Recognized as a derogatory term today, *berdache* referred to American Indian males who dressed as women, performed women's labor, and sometimes served in the role of prostitute to preserve young girls' chastity. In 1990, at a gathering of gay and lesbian First Nation and American Indians, a group of people coined the term "Two-Spirit" to challenge the long history of Eurocentrism, settler colonialism, and cultural genocide. McNabb has similar introductions to nonbinary cultures in Brazil, India, Indonesia, and the Philippines. In their section on India, for example, McNabb explains the history and culture of *hijras*. Acknowledged in written records as early as the eighth century BCE, *hijras* are neither men nor women; rather, they are a third gender with special cultural and social roles. As McNabb summarizes, "They have an important ritual role in weddings and at the birth of a child; they sing, dance, and bless the family in the name of their goddess, the Bahuchara Mata."<sup>2</sup>

The remaining chapters of part 1 focus on notable nonbinary people. McNabb offers short biographical sketches of well-known celebrities like Tilda Swinton, David Bowie, Miley Cyrus, and Prince. For librarians and educators, these examples are useful to push students to think about nonbinary visibility. On top of these noticeable pop culture figures, McNabb examines nonbinary people who have been pioneers in scholarship, activism, and art. The life and work of Vaginal "Crème" Davis, for instance, highlights the importance of intersectionality for understanding the range of nonbinary lived experiences. Davis produced zines, music, art videos, and installations, all of which engaged not only with sexuality and gender, but also with racialized identities. McNabb's vignettes of Davis and other notable nonbinary people should serve as helpful starting points for archivists, librarians, researchers, and students. These examples, however, highlight the extent to which part 1 of *Nonbinary Gender Identities* privileges gender variance in Western nations, even with the inclusion of the culturally specific genders found in the third chapter.

Part 1 of McNabb's work is a good introduction to nonbinary terminology, history, and public policy issues, although it emphasizes the stories of prominent people, possibly at the expense of analyzing gender theory. McNabb mentions the theoretical work of scholar-activists like Leslie Feinberg and Riki Wilchins, but their explanation of seminal works, like Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*,<sup>3</sup> could have been expanded on, especially considering the fact that Butler's concept of gender performativity has been misinterpreted by many for nearly thirty years. Analysis of other works, like Jack Halberstam's *Female Masculinity*,<sup>4</sup> would have also highlighted the important role theory has played for challenging the gender binary.

Part 2 of *Nonbinary Gender Identities* is sure to be an invaluable resource for researchers, archivists, librarians, teachers, and students alike. Here, McNabb has assembled impressive lists of resources on archives and special collections, nonfiction books, journal articles, theses and dissertations, works of fiction, professional organizations and associations, online resources, and multimedia. Historians will be especially indebted to McNabb's list of archives and special

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<sup>2</sup> Charlie McNabb, *Nonbinary Gender Identities: History, Culture, Resources* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 46.

<sup>3</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

<sup>4</sup> Jack Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998).

collections. This list includes well-known repositories, like the ONE Archives in Los Angeles, and smaller archives alike. McNabb warns that it can be difficult to locate material in archives, even those that specialize in sexual- and gender-variant individuals and groups. In the not-so-distant past, researchers, scientists, and others called nonbinary individuals “perverts,” “deviants,” or “mentally ill.” McNabb hints that these might be useful terms for scholars to search when trying to uncover nonbinary histories. McNabb includes thirty pages of repositories, most of them located in the United States, that contain materials related to nonbinary histories and cultures. This is a comprehensive resource that should be indispensable for scholars interested in archival work.

Other sections of part 2 will also find enthusiastic users. Teachers, for instance, might be inspired to incorporate art, nonfiction, essays, or ethnographies about nonbinary individuals after perusing McNabb’s chapter on nonfiction books. Librarians, on the other hand, could use this list in efforts to expand holdings on sexual- and gender-variant people. Teachers, both at the secondary and postsecondary levels, should appreciate the range of resources McNabb has accumulated. This includes online resources that could be readily—and cheaply—incorporated in classrooms. Finally, readers interested in fighting for nonbinary civil rights will find eleven pages of organizations and associations that they could support, either financially or through volunteer work.

Overall, McNabb provides a fine introduction to the history and culture of nonbinary gender identities. Readers who are unfamiliar with gender variance will learn a fair deal in part 1, whereas those more knowledgeable about nonbinary gender identities might find other books, like Halberstam’s *Trans\*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability*,<sup>5</sup> more useful for their purposes. Part 2, however, will offer readers something not available elsewhere: an abundance of resources for learning about, engaging with, and researching the history and contemporary experiences of nonbinary individuals and groups.

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<sup>5</sup> Jack Halberstam, *Trans\*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018).