

Here and Genderqueer: Millennials Redefine Gender For the Modern Age
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Before L Gonzalez and I sit down across from each other, I have to congratulate them about their new name.

I found out over Facebook, which is the usual way people disseminate that kind of information: that is, of course, they don't have any less accepting family members they have to keep secrets from. New gender identities are too delicate to be broadcast until the person in question already feels comfortable (which is when announcements like "started hormones!" and "getting top surgery!") pop up over social media. Revelations about sexual orientation are usually word-of-mouth.

"Yeah, I've been thinking about changing it to something more gender-neutral for a while now," L says, "Like, Lee, or, I don't know, Lance. But it feels weird to use a name that's not from my culture, so L for now."

L (just the initial, and pronounced *Elle*, like the magazine,) is a lanky Filipinx (the suffix -x being the preferred gender-neutral alternative to the masculine -o and feminine -a) with hair that used to be electric blue perhaps a few months ago, and has since faded to a dusty green with stark black roots. They identify as nonbinary, or someone who falls outside of the gender categories of male and female. With this identity comes a slew of new, gender-neutral terms: partner rather than boyfriend or girlfriend, you all rather than you guys, the singular they as a pronoun rather than he or she.

At twenty-three, L is firmly in the Millennial category, a recent college graduate who has grown up in one of the most liberal states in America. As part of UC Davis's student government, they advocated for greater recognition and support of undocumented and AB540 students on campus, more resources for transgender students looking to transition, and food stamp registration on campus. Right now, though, they mostly want to eat my cereal.

"Are those Reese's Puffs?"

They are. L usually just eats grocery store cereal, professing a lifelong brand loyalty to Safeway Kitchens. We start up chatting about recent events going on in L's life: they recently marathoned *Master of None*, Aziz Ansari's Netflix show, they're thinking about maybe going abroad for a little bit to teach English in Japan, their mom recently said something upsetting about L's choosing not to move back home, but what does she expect, if she's going to treat L like that all the time? Too late, I remember that we're supposed to be doing an interview.

L is like that. Quick-witted and charming, with an easy smile and a lot of opinions on the way the world is and the way it should be, L is the kind of person you could see as, if not a member of Congress someday, at least an internet personality. Their friends agree: on their last birthday, a

significant portion of well-wishers said something on the variation of “you’re going to change the world”. In conversation, they flit from topic to topic almost abruptly, always on the cusp of remembering something they wanted to talk about.

Case in point: halfway through venting about the last time their mother had a judgmental conversation with them about L never visiting, how much easier and more cost-effective it would be for everyone if they just moved back home, and how awful it is that her child has fallen prey to such American concepts as homosexuality and moving out.

“I’m like, never going to use Japanese any other time, and I want to travel and see the world, but, I don’t know,” they say, giving me a shrug, “You know. Hormones.”

L has a biweekly shot of hormones that is intended to adjust their gender presentation, and they don’t know if they’ll be able to bring that medication into a more conservative country like Japan. Furthermore, Japanese is a very gendered language, and the last time L took Japanese classes, the instructor used the wrong gender pronouns for them. And though L is usually outspoken about people using the right language at school or in the workplace, even coming out to their family (something few young Asian-American LGBTQIA people do), they’re not comfortable trying to introduce those kinds of concepts in their limited Japanese to people who may or may not understand.

This isn’t the first time gender has thrown up a roadblock in L’s path. They have had to fight for recognition from their professors, from their supervisors at work, from their family. Even now, there are no gender-neutral restrooms at their workplace, so L has to walk three blocks to a single-stall in a restaurant down the street. Getting hormones, too, was a struggle, but, from what I can glean from L’s comments to me, dysphoria was worse.

Critics of the growing genderqueer population often accuse those who ascribe to genders other than male or female of being “trendy”, or making it up for attention. However, for L especially, gender dysphoria is a visceral, physical and intensely painful experience. Gender dysphoria is often described as an intense feeling of depression, distress or hatred focused on one’s body, and specifically the gendered aspects of one’s body. Many of L’s genderqueer friends have resorted to surgery or hormones to make their bodies feel more gender-neutral. Others may bind their chests, begin shaving parts of their bodies or deliberately start dressing in androgynous styles.

Though not every transgender or genderqueer person experiences dysphoria, L recounts to me a period of intense hatred for parts of their body that often consumed their thoughts.

“I’ve had dysphoria ever since puberty,” they tell me. “I should be used to it by now, but, you know, it’s hard.”

Born in San Jose, L likes to recount a childhood they describe as idyllic and mostly unsupervised, especially before social groups began to subdivide into boy and girl. Their family would tell them about a future that was explicitly gendered: marriage and children, expectations to “act like a lady” or “be a man”, and changes to their body brought along by puberty that they resented and feared.

The path for L’s future seemed already set by the time they entered adolescence, with a lifetime of conforming to their parents’ ideas of what they would become. With every report card they brought home, expectations rose.

“I was always the lucky one, you know?” they confess to me, their voice lowering, “Because I was born here. Because I have papers. Not like--my aunts, my uncle, some of my cousins...”

They don’t name names. They don’t dare to. It is enough to say that L carried not only the hopes of themselves and their parents, but also the collective hope of their entire family.

Some of those hopes they met. They were an honors and AP student in high school, the first in their family to go to college. At school, they carefully controlled what their family heard and knew about their experience, and deliberate about what they liked or shared on social media: they told their parents about an internship with a student senator, but kept quiet about volunteering at the LGBTQIA resource center.

As time went on, L began to live what they call a double life. A prominent LGBT student leader on campus, whom administrators would often ask for advice or information on how to interact with student activists, they had to keep silent about their accomplishments at home. For a while, it seemed like they could keep it up forever.

Then their parents found out, and, for L, everything came crashing down.

“I told my sister,” they say, “And she told my parents, and the next time they talked to me was after a suicide attempt, so.”

They shrug, matter-of-fact. This is a story they’ve told so many times it has begun to lose its sting. They can tell a story of plummeting grades, debilitating panic attacks, forced hospitalization. At one point, they were sharing a room with three other students, all of whom were in the LGBT community, and using the student-run food bank they once helped organize. At another, they found themselves withdrawing mid-quarter for health reasons, and losing most of their financial aid.

Eventually, they fought their way back up to some sort of equilibrium. They graduated. They have a job, now, as an administrative assistant at a company where their supervisor has made sure to use the right pronouns. But for someone who knew only three years ago that they were

going to change the world, the possibility that they can effect real political change seem just out of reach.

“I could get an internship, like, I’m sure I could. I have the resume. But the grades? The money? I can’t live in DC. I’m still paying off medical debt, student debt, and with all the stuff with my mental health...”

They trail off, fiddling with their glasses. Then they look at me again, and it’s like all the trauma of the past few years has been tucked away, hidden behind an irrepressible hope.

A lot of what L struggles with is based on concepts that haven’t even been talked about yet, very much: international identity, Western versus Eastern global dialogue, the way race intersects with documentation. Even their gender identity is not very well-known: when Amandla Stenberg, an actress, came out as genderqueer, news outlets published a few puzzled articles about it, and then continued using she/her pronouns, anyway.

But as a student, they were a trailblazer for conversations and events on those topics, advocating for gender-neutral bathrooms on campus and community-specific mental health practitioners. They have seen many of the students they have mentored and supported go into successful future careers of their own.

“There’s always things in Sacramento. And I’ve been going to protests more, getting involved with that. And I’ve been thinking about volunteering with some places around here. Who knows?”