

NON-BINARY PEOPLE DON'T OWE YOU ANDROGYNY

Honors Thesis

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By

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ABSTRACT

Research and study regarding gender and the spectrum is still fairly new. Gender is not definitive between a black and white scale. It's not all or nothing. Gender exists on a spectrum where gender expression widely varies from person to person. This project reflects from my own experience of being a non-binary person who uses they/them pronouns. More and more studies have been done in recent years surrounding those who identify with being non-binary, non gender conforming, or genderqueer. The purpose of this project is to examine the visual culture attached to how non-binary people are represented in mainstream media, and how there are both positive and negative outcomes from these representations. While there is more inclusion now more than ever in media and entertainment, the popular aesthetics we see don't always reflect in every identifying non-binary person. It is also important to note that non-binary aesthetics differ from person to person. How one person chooses to present themselves, may not hold the same truth for another person. The project will be geared towards an epistemology approach with relation to social constructionism.

Though my experience does not reflect that of all genderqueer/non-binary people, I know there is truth behind the critique surrounding pop culture and mainstream media and how non-binary people are portrayed. This zine is less of a guide to understanding the non-binary person and more focused on stigmas and stereotypes perpetuated by the visual culture in mass media.

PREFACE

It has been recorded that non-binary people have “existed as far back as 400 B.C. to 200 A.D., when Hijras – people in India who identified as beyond male or female – were referenced in ancient Hindu texts (Abrams)”.





CROSSCULTURE

Here are some terms to use in order to familiarize yourself with the topic. While there may be some overlap in definitions, these overlaps are not finite and each definition should be taken as its own entity, as gender is not defined and can resonate differently from person to person.

AMAB/AFAB: Assigned male at birth/assigned female at birth. These terms are often used to refer specifically to the sex that a trans or otherwise gender-nonconforming person was assigned when they were born (Young).

Cisgender: Someone who identifies, binarily, with the gender they were assigned at birth. Not in any way a slur or denigratory. Often abbreviated to 'cis' (Young).

Gender dysphoria: "The discomfort a trans person feels due to the mismatch between the gender they were assigned at birth, and which people expect them to express, and the gender they identify with" (Young).

Gender nonconforming: "An umbrella term that refers to people whose gender identities and expressions don't match societal expectation. This term roughly includes transgender and genderqueer people, but also transvestites and crossdressers, and may include other, global categories of gender identity

that don't have a Western analogue. A person can be cisgender and also gender-nonconforming" (Young).

Gender presentation or expression: The physical manifestation (in appearance, dress, mannerisms and so on) of a person's gender identity. It's important to distinguish gender identity from gender expression, especially in contexts where being openly trans or gender-nonconforming is dangerous and gender identity must be hidden beneath a conventional presentation (Young).

Genderfluid: "A gender identity that changes from time to time. Genderfluid people can feel that they are female some of the time, male others, gender-neutral other times, and so on. A shifting identity. Genderfluid people can be accurately described using different gendered pronouns and labels at different times" (Young).

Genderqueer: “Someone who does not follow binary gender norms. They may be non-binary, agender, pangender, genderfluid, or another gender identity. People have used the term since the 1990s” (Young).

Intersex: “A person who, by a mismatch or unconventional formation of chromosomes and internal or external sex organs, is difficult to physically classify as male or female” (Young).

Misgender: A verb. To misgender someone is to refer to them as a gender other than that with which they identify, including by a gendered name.

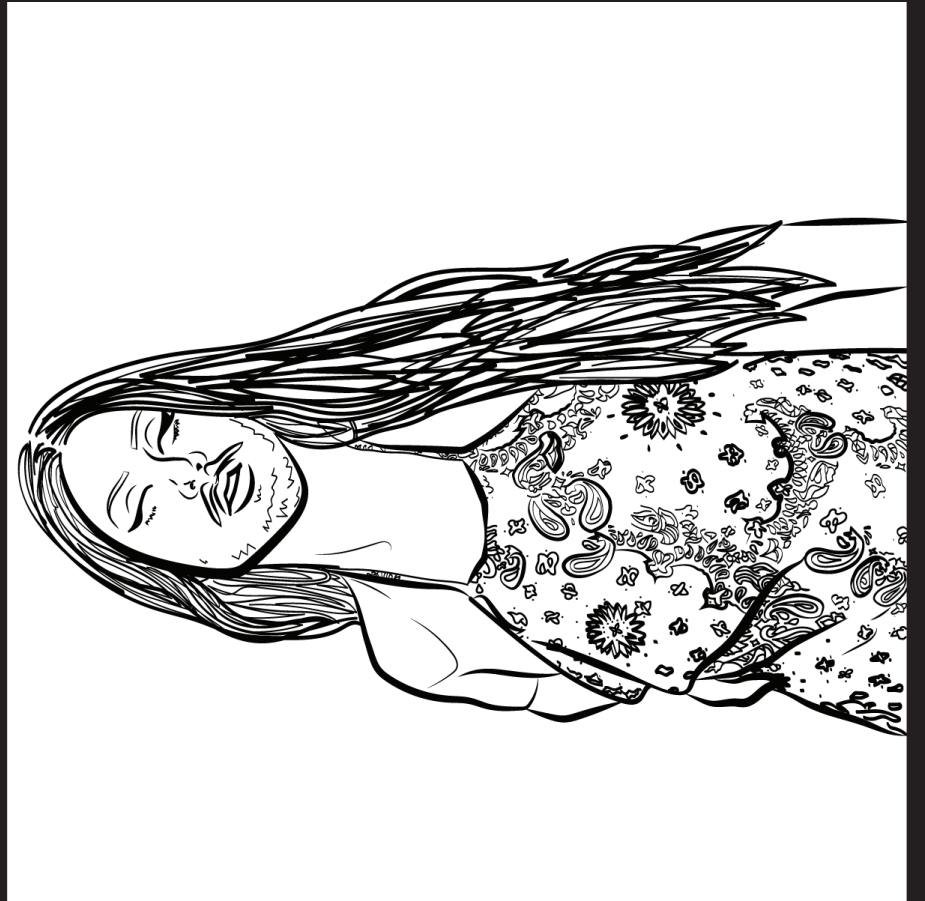
“Cisgender people can be misgendered, but the social stigma associated with being trans and non-binary, combined with the danger of ‘coming out’ and the lengths we must go to be recognized as our true gender identities, means that being misgendered can be harmful and upsetting” (Young).

Blending: “Based on appearance, vocal tone, movement, and other gendered features of behavior. When a transgender person blends, they are able to exist in public spaces without strangers realizing that they are transgender” (Flynn & Smith 3).

Gender Rejection: “The refusal to adopt traditional gender categories. This might include agender, genderless, gender neutral, or unisex identities” (Clarke 906).

STIGMA/CONCEALING IDENTITY

“There is no single model or even archetype of non-binary gender identity (Clarke 905)”.



Although the “non-binary” is relatively new in trans/gender studies, the existence of non-binarized identities is not. Because there are not universally accepted definitions of various non-binary identities within the transgender community or larger culture, individuals and subcultures may invoke the identity labels in nuanced, overlapping, or ambiguous ways. One can be gender nonconforming in self-presentation and not identify as non-binary. And one may identify as non-binary yet in some ways or on some occasions present themselves as gender conforming. Non-binary people are targeted for discrimination due to animus, ignorance, disbelief, disregard, disrespect, and the threat they pose to traditional gender norms.

Passing as binary not only mitigates the costs of being non-binary but also garners binary-based pleasures, privileges, and resources. However, even such “privileges” come at emotional costs such as feeling inauthentic or disempowered (Barbee and Schrock 590). A disproportionate number of mental health disparities have been observed in the transgender population, including inflated rates of PTSD, eating disorders, general psychological distress, and suicidal thoughts and behaviors. Thus, whether conforming to or subverting the binary, identity based emotional dilemmas are endemic to identifying as non-binary in a binarily gendered culture.

BLENDING

In Flynn and Smith's research article titled, "Interactions between blending and identity concealment: Effects on non-binary people's distress and experiences of victimization," Flynn and Smith look at the effects of identity concealment on non-binary people. The study analyzed the non-binary subset of the nationwide sample from the 2015 United States Transgender Survey (9,769 participants) to examine the effects of blending/passing and identity concealment on distress and victimization. Results from the study demonstrated that participants who did not blend reported more instances of victimization than participants who did blend. This being likely due to the fact that people who blend into a binary-gendered environment are less easy to identify as gender non-conforming by people who may target them (Flynn and Smith). While not concealing may put non-binary people at higher risk for victimization, blending into the binary-gendered environment may increase distress through identity erasure.

Non-binary people need accurate and fair representations in pop culture and media. Instead of media sticking to the traditional idea that gender queerness relies on an androgynous aesthetic, non-binary people and cisgender people need to be shown through a visual culture that represents the wide variety in ways people express their gender. Changing the public's perception of how non-binary represent themselves visually, will comfort non-binary people to feel less of a need to conceal their identity.

POPULAR CULTURE & QUEER REPRESENTATION

Despite the prevalence of non-binary and gender non-conforming identities throughout the world, representation of non-binary people in Western mainstream media has been sparse, if not outright nonexistent at times. When there is any visibility, it is dominated by what is now a stereotypical androgynous presentation.

Here are some popular non-binary faces from pop culture and media:



Claude Cahun (1894-1954) was a surrealist photographer who rejected the gender binary.

(Ryan)



Hikara Utada
(1983–present) Hikara is
an acclaimed Japanese
singer who came out as
non-binary in 2021.

(Kim)

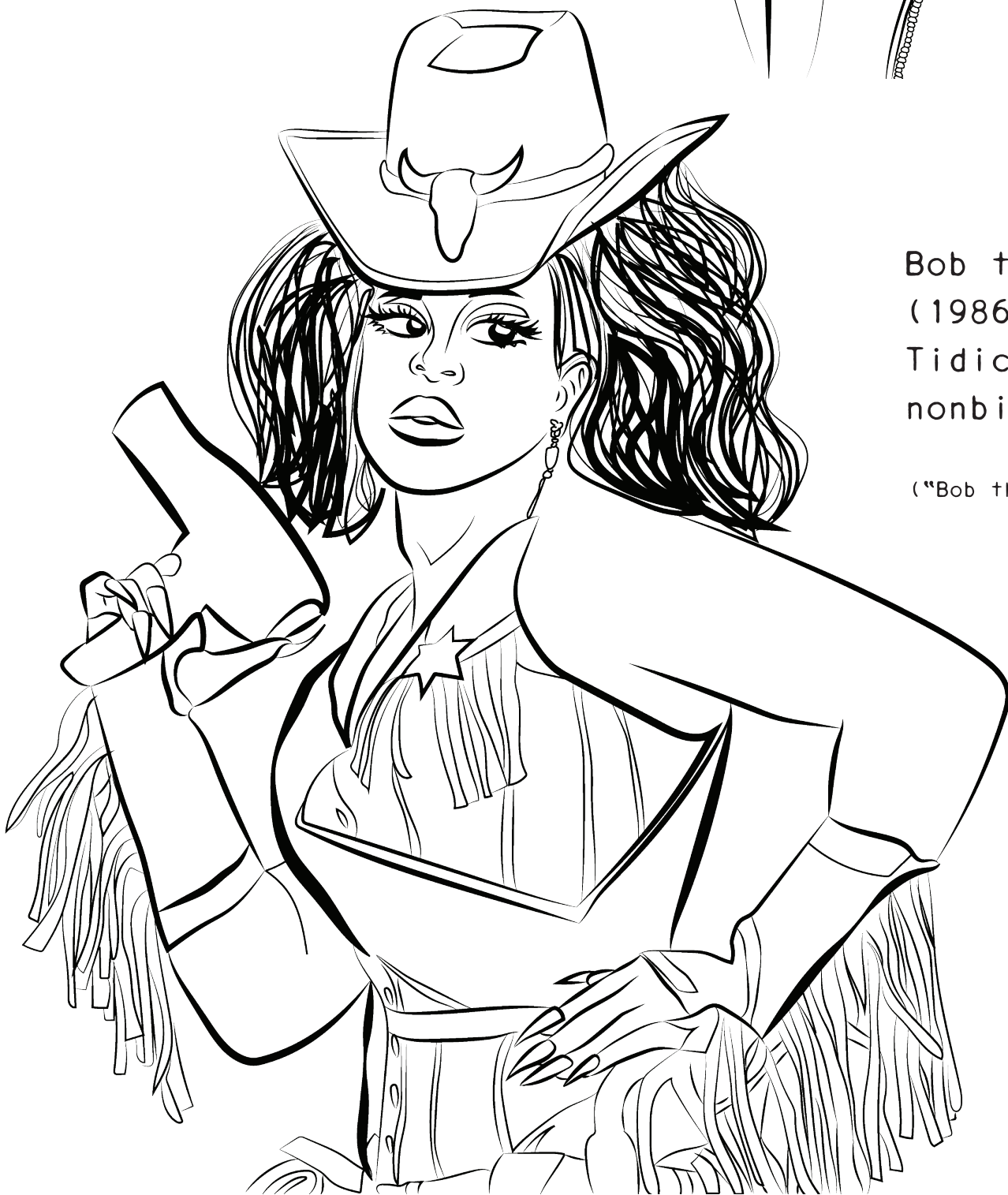
Janelle Monáe (1985–present)
“I feel my feminine, I feel
my masculine, I feel energy
that I can’t really
explain,” says Janelle.

(Veljanovski et al.)



Rebecca Sugar (1987-present) is an American animator who uses she/her and they/them. She is Cartoon Network's first non-binary person to create a series independently.

(Necessary).



Bob the Drag Queen (1986-present) Caldwell Tidicue is a pansexual nonbinary drag performer.

(“Bob the Drag Queen: Rupaul’s Drag Race”)



Ezra Miller (1992–present) came out as queer in 2012, and is one of the most sought-after actors in Hollywood. “Queer just means no; I don’t do that. I don’t identify as a man. I don’t identify as a woman. I barely identify as a human,” says Miller.

(Corner et al.)

Demi Lovato (1992-present) In 2021, Demi announced that they were non-binary and changing their pronouns to they/them.

(“Demi Lovato Is Non-Binary and Is Changing Pronouns to They/Them, Singer Announces”)



Dua Saleh (1995-present) Saleh is non-binary Muslim artists who uses they/them, he/him, and xe/xyr pronouns.



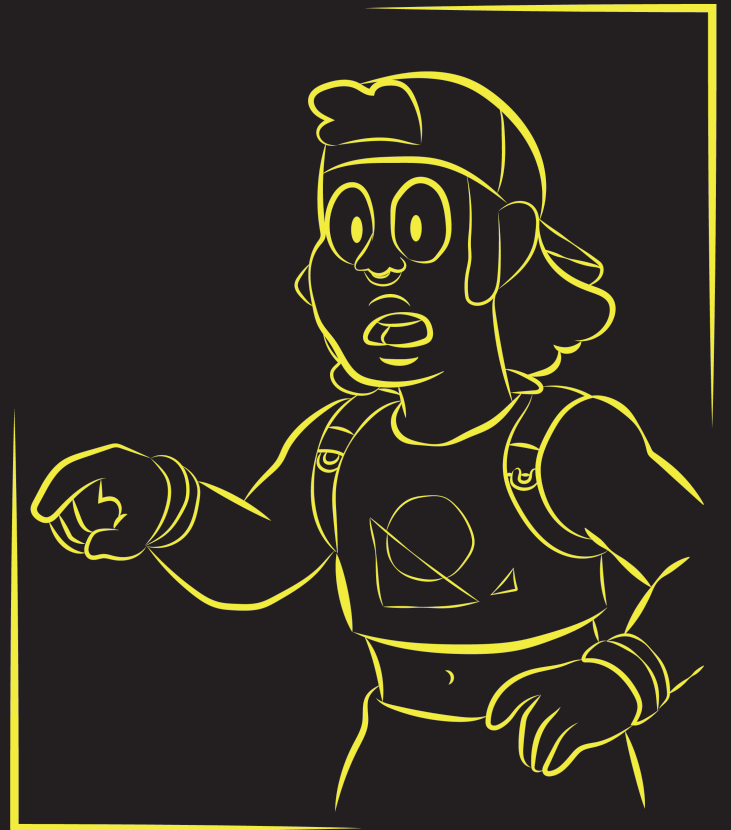
Amandla Stenberg (1998-present) "I tend to believe that gender as we've set it up in current-day society doesn't actually exist. I've said before that I'm comfortable with using the pronouns 'they' or 'them' alongside 'she' and 'her' just because that's a conversation that's important to me," they say.

(Chiu)



Representation through Animation

Rebecca Sugar (she/her/they/them) is a nonbinary icon who created the Cartoon Network show *Steven Universe*. Her show is historic; it features a diverse cast of queer women, nonbinary characters, and queer relationships. “In short, the show has radically changed paradigms for who and what children’s TV programming can represent, and it has vastly broadened LGBTQ+ representation on TV, no matter how you slice it (Rude)”.



Indya Moore
(a non-binary actor)
voiced a non-binary
character (Shep)
on *Steven Universe*.



THE ISSUES OF QUEERBAITING MEDIA

While queerness becomes more normalized and welcomed, this also welcomes in the opportunity for others to profit off of the lived experiences and desires of the LGBTQ+ community, whether that's through targeted advertising campaigns, political lip service to stir up electoral support or the appropriation of queer stories by cisnet artists and producers in film and TV" (McKeon).

Queerbaiting is understood as a tactic where media producers imply queer stories and media texts that are never actualized.

Queerbaiting seen in mainstream media is harmful for the LGBTQIA+ audience. The principal concern is that non-binary culture is being commodified. "The act of

queerbaiting hinders the LGBTQIA+ community and its visibility (Glade)". Production teams and showrunners rely heavily on stereotypes. But for the queer audience member, they miss out on real queer representation. Real queer representation has the ability to not only just be life changing, but also lifesaving. That's why it matters.

Problematic Representations

The main problem with media and queer representation is that unfortunately, most often times they are disproportionately white and inaccurate overall.

Harry Styles on the Cover of *Vogue*:

Vogue Magazine chose to have Harry Styles as the cover. The issue is not that he is on the cover, rather his portrayal praises him for breaking boundaries with his stereotypically feminine clothing (Ahlgrim). Because this was *Vogue*'s first cover with a non-female cover star, Styles upholds that white cisgender men are the face of gender neutral fashion.



Accurate depictions of non-binary people is so crucial in media content. Gender non-conformity has existed in history for some time. Gender nonconformity isn't the latest "fad." Genderqueer folks have the right to act, dress, and express themselves however they like despite what media thinks how non-binary people should present themselves in order to be validated.

FAIR QUEER REPRESENTATION: CAL

Much to my surprise I was satisfied with Netflix's *Sex Education* portrayal of a genderqueer character in its third season. The series introduced the non-binary character, Cal (played by Dua Saleh) They were true to themselves as a proud non-binary person, but not in a caricature kind of way.



Cal's portrayal was accurate enough to my personal experience and journey to discovering and exploring expression and identity. Cal's character and their relateability stems from certain instances that many non-binary people experience, including: the times Cal is misgendered by both the school headmistress and peers; the relationship Cal has to their body and to the extent to which they feel comfortable sharing it with others; the feeling of being uncomfortable in tight clothes; identifying as neither a boy or a girl; and the anxiety of having no bathrooms at school for genderqueer/transgender students readily accessible. Cal's existence in the media space has been long needed. Dua Saleh who plays the character, identifies as a non-binary character off-screen. How often do we actually see instances of when real LGBTQ+ people are casted to play those roles?

Media representation means everything. Portrayals of minorities in the media not only affect how others see them, but it affects how they see themselves.

Non-binary/genderqueer
people **DO NOT** owe
anyone androgyny in
order to redeem their
gender identity and
expression.

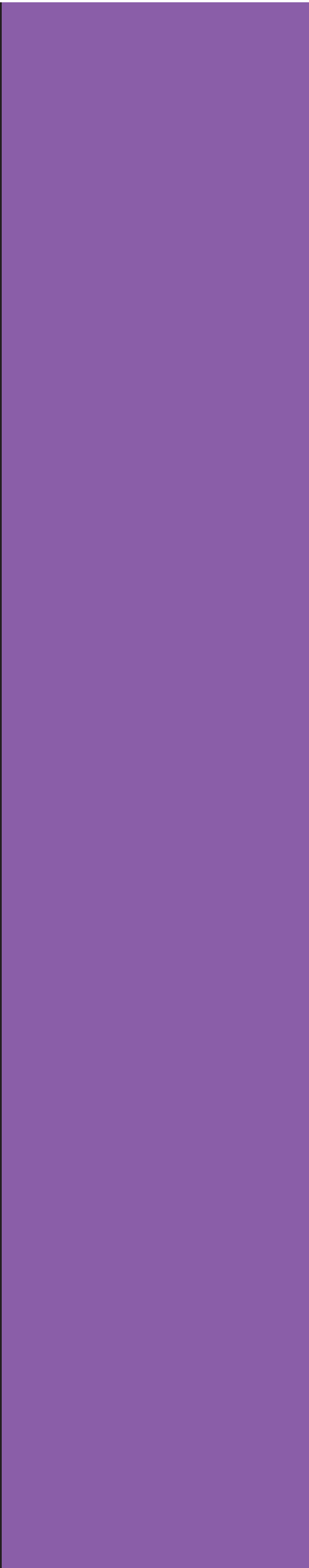


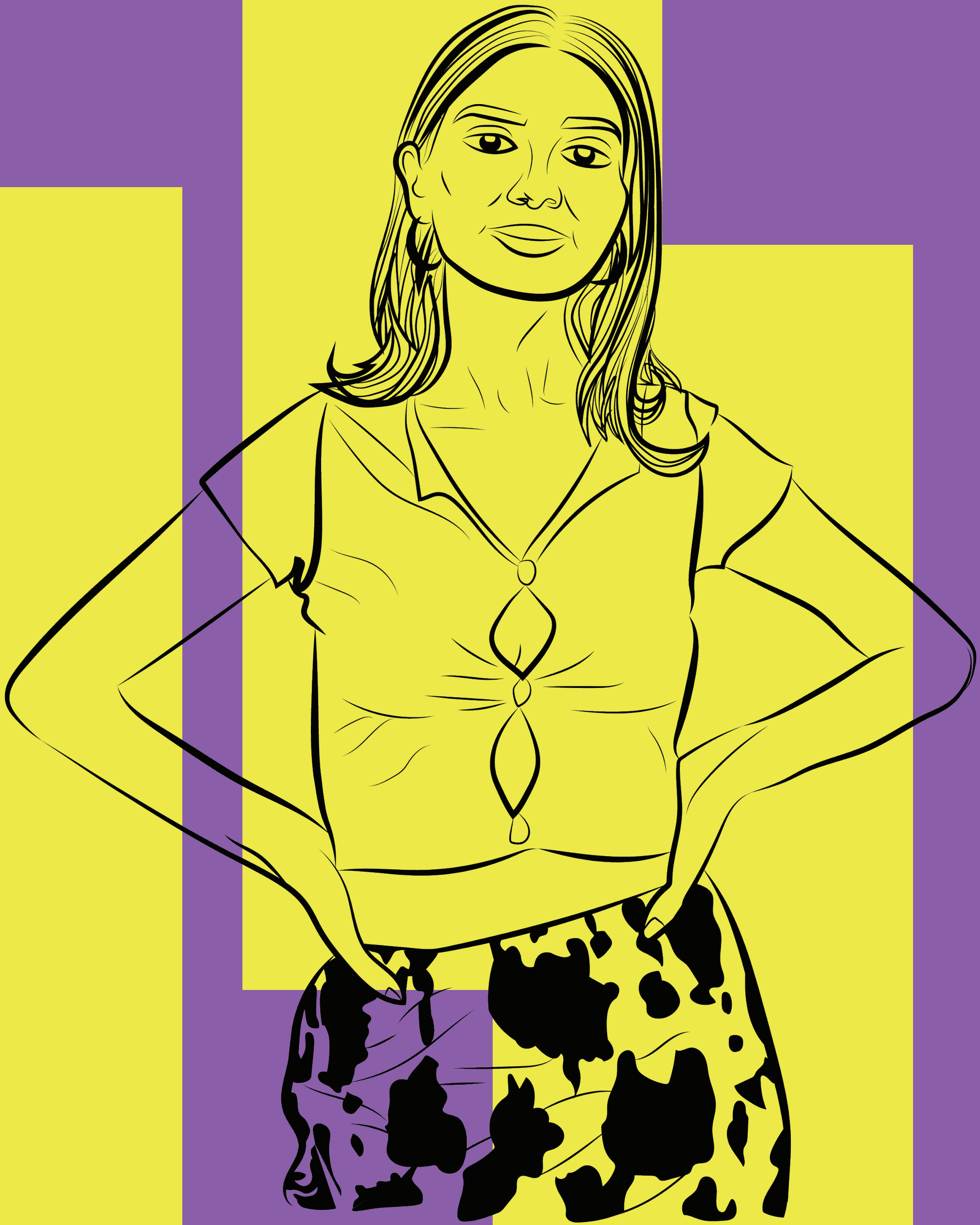
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**here are my friends
and close ones who
identify within the
non-binary umbrella:**

















THE END

W/S