

Its Name Is John



Mana prefers the pronoun "it" when referring to itself and recently changed its name from John Paul Krause to embrace its nonbinary identity.

Pronouns adapt to reflect the full gender rainbow

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“He,” “she,” “it,” “they”... pronouns may just be words to some. Historically, with “he” or “she” comes identity and a sense of autonomy. For others, a chosen pronoun allows them to navigate the world without gender expectations.

Twelve percent of people ages 18-34 identify as being neither male nor female, according to a 2017 survey conducted by the LGBTQ advocacy organization GLAAD.

An individual’s gender identity, or internal sense of gender, may not match their external gender expression via name, behavior, voice or physical characteristics.

Compared with the younger generations, only 6% of Generation Xers and 3% of baby boomers identify as neither male nor

female, according to GLAAD. Although baby boomers may seem less likely to be non-conforming, growing up, their limited vocabulary of the gender spectrum may have simply confined them to the gender binary.

In comparison, more recent generations have developed language enabling them early on to identify outside gender norms. “There’s a whole rainbow of identities,” says Ardel Haele-Thomas, chair of LGBT Studies at City College and author of the textbook “Introduction to Transgender Studies.”

Haele-Thomas identifies as transgender and genderqueer. The former refers to people whose gender doesn’t correspond with the one they were assigned at birth, while the latter acts as a catch-all

for people who can’t neatly fit their gender identity into a male or female box.

Haele-Thomas prefers to use the pronoun “they” when referring to *themselves*. Assigned female at birth, *they* “never felt quite right” with the gender binary. *They* originally came out as lesbian in the ’80s, when there was little information about trans or nonbinary persons.

In many ways John Paul Krause is a typical City College student. With a professional background in engineering, Krause is also a self-taught musician influenced by soundtracks of ’80s-era video games. By returning to school, Krause hopes to integrate a knowledge of computer science with a passion for musical expression and visual art.

Krause, who at the time of publication



Mana, left, greets Hold Sall Vesselényi, right, who prefers the pronoun “they” at the Ocean Campus cafeteria. The two talked for a bit to catch up and then sat together while working on their school assignments.

changed *its* name to Mana, prefers to use the lesser known gender neutral pronoun “it” because the word “removes boundaries.”

“My life is completely about freedom,” Mana says. “So by using ‘it’ as a pronoun, I am not greater or less than anything.”

City College professor and advisor at the Queer Resource Center, Mark Piper, considers the issue of gender neutrality from a historical perspective. Piper, who uses the pronoun “he,” notes that each decade has had its own fight for equality, citing the Black Power revolution of the ’60s and ’70s and the gay pride movement in the ’80s.

David Bowie set the stage when he challenged existing ideas about masculinity by wearing feminine makeup and costumes. Around the same time, Bay Area musician Sylvester, known as “The Queen of Disco,” openly embraced a genderqueer aesthetic before the term even existed.

Many millennials and post-millennials are continuing to redefine gender, relationship models and the language used in this new conversation—one that Piper says is “long overdue.”

“They,” “them” and “their” pronouns are becoming more common in everyday language, but there is a host of other pronouns, such as “zie,” “zim” or “zir” and “sie,” “sir” or “hir” among others.

“Gender as a concept is not useful the way it is used,” Mana points out. “There

are other languages that only have one pronoun.”

For instance, the Finnish language forgoes gender-specific pronouns altogether. In Swedish, the gender-neutral pronoun “hen” was first coined in 1966 and gained broader use in the LGBTQ community in the ’90s. It was accepted into the Swedish Academy Dictionary in 2015.

Although more conservative Swedes still avoid its use, “hen” has gained more mainstream acceptance since the publication

of a 2007 article in the Swedish magazine *Språk*, which poses the question “hon eller han?” (he or she?). Five years later, the pronoun was used in Sweden’s first ever gender-neutral children’s book, Jesper Lundqvist’s “Kivi & Monsterhund.”

But “hen” is more formal, says international City College student Hold Sall Vesselényi, who prefers the pronoun “they.” Vesselényi says that much of the Swedish

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LGBTQ community uses the less formal pronoun “den,” which translates to “it.”

To Mana, humanity is intimately connected with our ecosystem, and *it* rejects a prescribed social pecking order. “The idea that there’s a hierarchy has been created by humans,” Mana says. “If we refer to the sun, moon, earth, animals, plants and all these things that surround us as ‘it’ then I also want to be referred to as ‘it.’”

As more people choose to identify as gender-neutral, government policies around gender in the U.S. and abroad are slowly changing.

Gender classification can affect a person’s access to employment, healthcare and



Sall Vesselényi, left, and Mana, right, study together at the Ocean Campus cafeteria.



Mana talks to Adobe Books' host, who goes by the name Bloodflower, as it sets up a soundboard before performing at the Mission District bookstore.

voting rights, all of which require a valid ID. However, many legal forms still offer only two checkboxes: male or female.

Some states have adapted to reflect the expansion of gender identities. Legal documents like driver's licenses and birth certificates now list the nonbinary gender "X" as an option in nine states including California and in Washington, D.C.

However, most nonbinary U.S. citizens have little say on how their states identify them in official documents.

Governor Jerry Brown signed the Gender Recognition Act in 2017, which gives gender non-conforming California residents the right to a nonbinary legal designation on birth certificates and driver's licenses.

The bill went into effect this year and acknowledges a variety of nonbinary designations that includes agender, gender-queer, gender fluid, Two Spirit, bigender, pangender, gender-nonconforming and gender variant.

The federal government has not yet followed suit.

American passports still misrepresent nonbinary citizens. The U.S. State Department website states, "the only sex markers available for a U.S. passport are male and female."

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Over spring break, Haele-Thomas used *their* passport to travel to Belfast in Northern Ireland to speak at a conference about trans history. While travelling, *they* were forced to assume an identity false to *them*. "Here I go with my passport with 'she' and I'm just going to have to basically get through it," Haele-Thomas says.

In August 2017, Canada became the first

country in the Americas to allow the use of a nonbinary marker "X" on passports.

"Canada's light years ahead of us," Haele-Thomas says, calling it "the best place to fly as a nonbinary, trans person."

Meanwhile, the Swedes and Finnish have implemented progressive gender policies.

Vesselényi, originally from Gothenburg, Sweden recalls, "When I changed in sixth grade, I felt very other. I was bullied at school since kindergarten."

Vesselényi says *their* bullies were raised to believe that "if you were assigned female at birth, it's important to be a certain way, and if you were assigned male at birth, it's important to be another way."

Some schools in Sweden now make a habit of addressing students with gender-neutral pronouns. They encourage boys and girls to play and socialize in ways that are traditionally associated with the opposite gender. Textbooks and storybooks reflect gender neutrality as well.

"Stories that support a strict gender

binary? Gone. Stories that socialize girls to be girls and boys to be boys? Gone,” Haeefe-Thomas writes in *their* transgender studies textbook.

Although gender neutrality is gaining ground, pushback is inevitable. In the U.S., the current administration recently banned transgender persons from serving in the military. “With our current administration, we’re going backwards,” Haeefe-Thomas says.

Changing the law is one thing, but changing ingrained attitudes about gender expectations is another.

“Day-to-day, everywhere I go, I get read as a woman. It gets tiring after a while,” Haeefe-Thomas says. After eight years of using gender-neutral pronouns, *they* face resistance to their preferred pronouns, even within the LGBTQ community.

The establishment of gender-neutral bathrooms at City College has been slow. At Ocean Campus, the school recently converted the first floor bathroom in the Creative Arts Building into an

gender-neutral facility.

After the administration converted the bathroom, a vandal spray-painted W’s where the sign for “Women” used to be. Later the administration reverted the

all 11 City College centers. This reflects a California law mandating that all single occupancy restrooms in businesses, government buildings and public spaces be identified as all-gender.

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all-gender sign back to its original binary form.

“We’re sad and angry at the continued vandalism of the all-gender bathrooms,” say Jennifer Dawgert-Carlin and Natalie Cox, members of the all-gender bathroom subcommittee.

As the nonbinary population rises with younger generations, bathrooms will be forced to adapt. The Facilities Department announced recently that all-gender restrooms will be made available across

There’s a push toward a new narrative, one that recognizes the legal rights of all individuals, no matter their gender identity or whether they use the pronoun “she,” “he,” “they,” or “it.”

“With pronouns, it’s a matter of respect,” Piper says. “I’m very encouraged by the new generation, but change does scare people. You have to change. That’s a part of the human evolution.”

Note: For clarity, gender neutral pronouns have been denoted by italics.



Hold Sall Vesselényi fills in their eyebrows while applying makeup between classes at Ocean Campus. They prefer the pronoun “they” as part of their nonbinary identity.