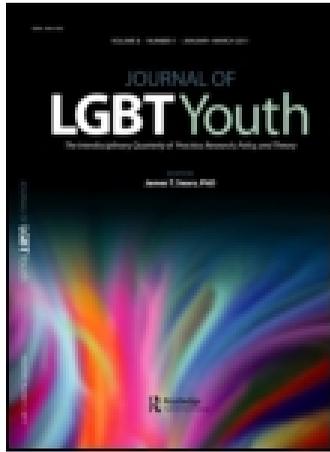


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“Couldn’t I be Both Fred and Ginger?”: Teaching About Nonbinary Identities Through Memoir

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In Tango: My Childhood, Backwards and in High Heels, Mx¹ Justin Vivian Bond writes about v’s² experiences as a trans child. The overarching narrative of the memoir, stitched together by Bond’s recounting of friendships, gender play, sexual exploration, and reflective insight, provides a springboard from which educators can expand students’ understandings of nonbinary gender identities, expressions, and life experiences. After an overview of the memoir, this book review examines how the text can serve as an important pedagogical tool to explore the complex issues of gender, sex, sexuality, identity, and ‘normalcy.’*

KEYWORDS *Identity, memoir, nonbinary, pedagogy, trans**

In *Tango: My Childhood, Backwards and in High Heels*, the performer, singer, and artist Justin Vivian Bond writes about v’s experiences as a trans*³ child. Similar to other seminal texts in the queer autobiographical genre, such as Bornstein’s (1994) *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us* and Bergman’s (2010) *Butch is a Noun*, Bond’s memoir answers the call some have made for additional literature regarding the lives and experiences of gender-nonconforming individuals (e.g., Feinberg, 1998; Mattilda, 2006). The memoir offers a complex and multifaceted view of growing up as a trans* child, thus troubling the simplistic notion that ‘It Gets Better’ (Savage & Miller, 2012). In doing so, Bond, who identifies as transgender, describes v’s gender identity as follows: “When I was younger I used to refer to myself as a ‘non-op transexual,’ [sic] meaning I was a transexual [sic] who didn’t need to have surgery to assert what I was” (Bio, 2013). Although v began

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hormone treatments, Bond stated it was not to fit within the gender binary, articulating, ‘For me there is no opposite sex. For me there is only identity and desire’ (Bio, 2013). Bond reflects this continued resistance to arriving at a place of gender fixity throughout v’s book. Thus, the overarching narrative of the memoir, stitched together by Bond’s recounting friendships, gender play, sexual exploration, and reflective insight, provides a springboard from which educators can expand students’ understandings of nonbinary gender identities, expressions, and life experiences.

In the first chapter of *Tango*, Bond shares three discrete memories. Two in particular—one about v’s desire to be both Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers and another about Bond being punished for wearing v’s mother’s lipstick to school—quickly establish Bond’s nonbinary identity. The third story, about v’s diagnosis of attention deficit disorder (ADD), serves as an entry into remembering v’s childhood. The possibility of having ADD leads into the second chapter, where Bond discusses v’s experiences in elementary school. This is the first time readers are introduced to Michael Hunter—Bond’s first lover—who plays a central role throughout the rest of the memoir. Bond also discusses v’s first sexual experiences—with two other boys during an overnight Cub Scout camping trip—and v’s mother’s ensuing desire for v to be ‘normal.’

Bond begins Chapter 3 by discussing v’s conversion to Christianity in sixth grade as a way to cover up v’s sexual desire for other boys. Bond goes on to explain how v and Hunter became adolescent lovers, despite Michael Hunter being one of v’s most vocal bullies in school. Describing their relationship, Bond (2011) writes:

This combination of attraction and revulsion was extremely confusing. I really did hate him, but there was something irresistible about our ongoing physical relationship. I felt what we were doing was wrong, and I’m pretty sure he did too, but between us, we found ways of acting out fantasies and exploring identities we never would have gotten to discover otherwise. (pp. 69–70)

Bond continues to blend memories of v’s sexual encounters with Hunter and v’s exploration of v’s gender identity. Bond also seamlessly weaves stories of v’s ongoing private sexual relationship with those of v’s public interactions with family members, specifically v’s mother and Hunter’s parents and siblings. Chapter 3 concludes with Bond’s ending v’s sexual relationship with Hunter in high school. In the final chapter of v’s book, Bond shares a recent dream v had in which v is sitting with Hunter at a picnic with family and friends and no one questions their being together. This dream causes Bond to muse about what v calls the “luxury of normality” (p. 133), or the ability to live a life that is not under constant scrutiny. Although v expresses comfort in v’s nonbinary—and nonnormative—gender identity and expression,

v recognizes the pressures and stresses experienced during v's childhood due to others perceiving v as 'abnormal.' Concluding v's book with an affirmative tone, Bond states that v hopes, "A time will come when queer children can be themselves without any questions, able to experience the same dramas, heartaches, and joys that any other kids would have to go through, no more and no less" (p. 133).

The stories and interactions Bond discusses throughout v's memoir provide valuable fodder for educators to talk with students about the complex interplay between sex, gender, and sexuality. Educators using *Tango* in their curricula can also explore the public/private dynamic discussed throughout the book, especially how what may appear to be private instead operates as an open secret. An example of an open secret in the memoir is Bond's gender transgression. Despite Bond's mother knowing about such transgressions (e.g., she finds out v is wearing lipstick to school and learns v wears her bras around the house when she is running errands), she shows no desire to indulge or affirm her child's gender identity and expression. Educators could use these experiences to have students explore the false private/public dichotomy (e.g., What does it mean for something to be 'public' and/or 'private'? Is anything ever fully public or private? Why is maintaining this false dichotomy important?), the way some people in the memoir display an epistemology of ignorance (e.g., Dotson, 2011; Gilson, 2011) (e.g., How does Bond's mother actively *unknow* things about her child's identity? What are the benefits and liabilities of this active form of ignorance in one's life? What effects does this have on Bond?), and how memory—and by extension, memoir as a style of writing—influences knowledge (e.g., Who controls the creation of knowledge? What memories are 'true'? How does a memoirist build credibility? Is Bond's memoir believable, and how does one's answer uncover how one constructs notions of 'truth,' 'knowledge,' and 'reality?').

Another common theme throughout the memoir is the notion of normalcy and how it shapes the lives of queer and trans* children. Furthermore, because Bond identifies as nonbinary, the questions brought about by the notion of 'normalcy' (e.g., What is it? Who decides? What effects does the notion have on the lived experience of queer and trans* youth?) provide an added layer of complexity for educators to discuss with students. For example, while legal, medical, and educational fields may recognize trans* identities, they largely privilege transsexuals, or those trans* people who seek a 'match' between their sex assigned at birth, their gender identity, and their gender expression, as opposed to trans* people with nonbinary gender identities and expressions (Spade & Wahng, 2004). Because of this, Carrera, DePalma, and Lameiras (2012) suggest, "The long road to social justice [for nonbinary trans* people] needs to begin with re-imagining current understandings of sex and gender" (p. 1007). Educators and students can take up the call for reimagination by thinking about how they both resist and reinforce the notion of 'normalcy.' Furthermore, educators can encourage

students to interrogate the policies, practices, and institutions in which gendered norms operate to limit the life chances of trans* people with nonbinary gender identities and expressions. Such reimagining could take place during class discussions, through written projects (e.g., journaling assignments, formal essays), and/or through interactive projects where students interact with and seek to positively change their environment (e.g., social action projects).

One critique of Bond's memoir is that the book can read as disjointed at times (Denizet-Lewis, 2011). However, the disjointed nature of the text reflects the ways in which *v* successfully disrupts the gender binary, both through lived experience and storytelling. As such, educators can leverage this style of writing as a way to encourage readers to reflect on their need for a seamless, easily grasped narrative. For example, educators can ask students how the style in which one chooses to write is an intentional choice through which to express key aspects of oneself and others. Furthermore, educators can ask students why they feel a desire for a more coherent narrative and how such coherency may (in)accurately reflect their own lives and the lives of others. Using this approach, students are able to invert critiques that Bond's memoir lacks continuity in favor of questioning the cultural investment in coherence and normalcy. It also allows students and educators to unpack if the notions of coherence and normalcy are mythical and, if so, why they continue to prevail socially. Turning inward, educators can encourage students to contemplate what their own investments are in these notions and how they reify and/or deconstruct them throughout their lives.

NOTES

1. Mx is Justin Vivian Bond's preferred prefix.

2. "V" is Justin Vivian Bond's preferred pronoun. As *v* elucidated, "Since my name is Justin Vivian Bond and since Vivian begins with a V and visually a V is two even sides which meet in the middle I would like *v* to be my pronoun" (Bio, 2013). Bond also explained the pronoun can be capitalized when it is used to replace *v*'s name.

3. Taken from a computer search function that allows one to search for a term in addition to any characters after that term (e.g., searching for "trans*" would yield results for the prefix "trans" and any letters after it, such as "transgender" and "transsexual"), the use of the asterisk in the term trans* represents an inclusive turn in recognizing all who transgress, trouble, and/or resist the gender binary (Killermann, 2012).

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