

Transcript of Podcast 035: Toxic Masculinity and Pride In Your Gender

{Intro}

JAX: It's so nice to see that you're alive. We haven't heard from you in ages. We were concerned. There was a great deal of concern. But you know, at least you're alive. I love you. You're so pretty. Hehe.

{intro music – jaunty, bouncy}

{Intro standard announcement:

Hello. Thank you for tuning in. You're listening to Travel Tales From Beyond The Brochure, a weekly series looking at unfamiliar places across the world, and aspects of travelling you may never have thought of. I'm your host, The Barefoot Backpacker, a middle-aged Brit with a passion for offbeat travel, history, culture, and the 'why's behind travel itself. So join me as we venture ... beyond the brochure.}

{Music fades. Podcast begins}

Hello :)

I'm a couple of weeks late with this one. I'm going to blame admin. Admin is always a good excuse. Yes.

It's not been a terribly interesting few weeks so far in 2021 in all honesty. Apart from a couple of trips out to the supermarket, I've not done anything exciting. I went for a couple of runs at the very back end of December, before the snow came [I have a friend in Sheffield who made the 'and finally' section of the local TV news because a news van accidentally passed her while she was taking her daily jog. She runs barefoot. It was snowing. They were intrigued. I am not that hardcore.], but mostly I've just been flaky and lazy. I probably need to do something about this, but as I type the temperature outside is -1 feels like -7. It's sunny and bright and clear, but still, feels like -7, and there's a small trace of snow. I won't talk about this now as I've plans for an imminent future episode to be on the combination of snow and travel, but be sure I Have Feelings about this topic.

Time at home has given me the opportunity to do some much-needed and long-overdue tasks though. I'm going to call them admin. It's one of my favourite words. Apart from a couple of e-mails I'd been putting off for a while, one of the major tasks was to re-create a media kit.

Now.

It seems weird saying this here and now, bearing in mind you're listening to my podcast, but ... for a while people have been telling me I have a decent voice. And for years I've ignored them because that involves me being comfortable with who I am and accepting of my abilities. But (and having regular sessions with a therapist has helped) so many different people from different circles have said the same thing that I've decided I should do something about it, just to see, just to find out.

So once lockdown is eased, I'll be going to London, to a recording studio, to make up a voice reel that I can then use to tout around voice agents and freelance websites to say 'hey, hire me to do the voicework that you don't want to do'. In January I had a preliminary meeting with the sound engineer where we went through sample scripts to see what my voice is best suited for, which was really interesting and just what I needed, as it's one thing having a good voice, but completely another to use it to its best effect. Remember {puts on an accent} I can't do accents or other voices very well at all {returns to normal accent} so I'd never be any kind of, I dunno, video game

character voice artist, but a corporate video or advert? Sure, why not.

In similar but unrelated news, one of my friends writes stories (Victoria Pearson; you've heard her on my pod before in fact – she was the person who created the 'Guide To Your First Protest' I published last year), and she self-publishes them – indeed she's just launched her latest collection of dark fairy tales this week, so go check it out. Anyway, she wants to sell them in audiobook format, and has asked me to record them for her. V's one of those people I often vent to with angst about 'am I good enough to make it worthwhile to invest in myself', so she's very much in my corner.

Another thing I've done in terms of self-promotion and self-development is to re-create a 'Media Kit' for my website and podcast. These are very common in the creative world, and act almost like a 'sales brochure' – they tell interested parties (like brands and tourist boards, in the travel blogger world) who I am, how many people visit my website, and what I can do for them. Obviously with everything that's happening in the world right now, the travel blogger side isn't going to be doing much (although I've yet to tout myself to Luton's Tourist Board. Assuming it's got one.), but creating it was useful to see what else I can do, and importantly, what else people view me as being good at, or at least a resource for. Like, at the time of recording this pod, my most popular blog posts in the previous 30 days were, in order, my overview of the intersection of asexuality and kink, the explanation as to why I call myself 'The Barefoot Backpacker', and the post where I detail my adventures of my first wild camp experience where I couldn't work out how to put a tent up, forgot to bring anything to light my camping stove with, and spent the entire night shivering in three layers of clothing. This suggests my niches are sexuality, the barefoot lifestyle, and hiking. And to think I started off as a travel blogger talking about inter-railing and ancient ruins.

I also added to my Media Kit a whole series of endorsements. For years I was unable to accept compliments, I just brushed them off and ignored them, and didn't like to be reminded of them, because I always thought they were just saying things to be nice, and that none of them were real. But again, therapy has helped with this, and now I feel a little more comfortable displaying them. Because, well, I Am Enough, yes?

Therapy has also been useful to understand more about who I am, fundamentally, and what makes me feel the most comfortable. There have been things on my mind for a while, but it's only over time that I've worked out what it all means, holistically, and that several different disparate thoughts I've had have all been quite interconnected.

I mean, it all started with my explorations and realisations of asexuality, and more recently of course aromanticism – oh yes, it's International Quirkyalone Day on Sunday, don't forget! But lately I've realised other things, other beliefs and concepts, that I originally thought were entirely separate, are also linked.

One such was my feelings about masculinity. Back in late 2017, I was having a conversation with the self same Victoria about men – I've no idea what prompted it, probably just an idle thought, and I had a bit of a rant to her about the concept of toxic masculinity, it's fair to say. Her response was that she helped run a political podcast (“(Left) Ungagged”) and this was exactly the sort of thing they were interested in people recording for them. So I did.

A year and a bit later, I wrote it down as a blog post, and referenced it at the time in Podcast Episode 8 (which was otherwise about Uzbekistan, which has become a rare 'out of date' pod, but in fairness it was even then, as I was talking about how it was when I visited some four years earlier). Since then I've referenced it – indeed it's been my pinned tweet for a while – but it always felt like a post 'on its own', disconnected from almost everything else I've written. Even my posts about asexuality, although referencing it, don't really cover the subject directly.

Until now, I guess, when some of the feelings I had when I wrote it now make sense in other ways.

Anyway, I want to read my post now as I think it's relevant to what I'm going to say later. And the post starts with the then-current hashtag #ThisGirlCan. It's short, pithy, effective. A great example of how a simple theme can be used to unite so many people of different backgrounds, ethnicities, sexualities, and abilities. It demonstrates the differences between individual women but collectively it shows that despite any of these differences, each individual woman can succeed on their own terms, and it doesn't make them any less of a woman if their individual goals are different. Collectively, it promotes all women and allows them to belong; it empowers each and every woman to be the best they can, without reference to other women's aims, abilities, and drive.

To put it simply, #ThisGirlCan means that every woman is, regardless of anything else, a valid, accepted, acceptable, woman.

There is no male equivalent of this. This is a problem.

There is a perfectly acceptable argument that says there doesn't need to be, that the point of #ThisGirlCan is because the nature of society is one that drives female empowerment into the ground, and women need that specific boost to highlight their individual successes and needs, 'by women for women', and not be hidden by the toxic masculinity of patriarchy.

This would be true, except for one thing. Men.

The problem is, as I see it, how men are portrayed and how, more importantly, how men portray themselves. There is an unwritten set of conduct amongst men, that forces them to act in a certain way, and any deviation from this is seen as 'unmanly'. You can see this any time a traditional masculine stereotype is challenged – not just the recent Gillette advert but pretty much throughout history; it is, indeed, one of the driving plot points of the film "Billy Elliot". In truth it's much older than that – phrases in the language used so often they've become clichés, yet still feel unchallengeable: "boys don't cry", "stiff upper lip", "be a man", "man up". Alternatives are almost never shown in pop culture, and when they are, they're either criticised within the medium, or outside in the mainstream society/media.

I've been told on several occasions, by male friends even, that I'm not a "red-blooded male". They couldn't generally elaborate on what that means, but I think we all know. It means a strong sexual desire, often dominant. It means a healthy interest in 'male'-assumed pastimes like football, boxing, cars, lager, female models. I once told a work colleague that I found the music video to Beyonce's "Single Ladies" to be very boring as it was simply "three women dancing, nothing actually happens". His response was "oh, but what women!".

This sort of attitude is an example of why patriarchy exists. It's how people like Harvey Weinstein, like Bill Cosby, could get away with so much for so long. "Why did no-one say something; they must have known?" Well, yes, yes they probably did. But challenging masculinity like that, when you're a man, is something that cuts to the very core of what it means to be a "man", because we don't have any visible alternative. Men assume men will be like them. To reveal yourself to be otherwise makes you 'less of a man' in their eyes – cue the dismissal of men who challenge, or who have alternative interests, as 'queer', 'pooftah', or 'nonces'; in their eyes we're 'merely women with dicks' and therefore not to be trusted, not to be listened to. Now I'm not one for peer approval (ffs!), but I imagine a lot of other men are. Especially if they're not 'alpha males', they'll tend to get 'quietened out' by the more assertive men who are the power-hungry lot we're trying to fight against.

Note also the sheer numbers of male mental health sufferers, male runaways, and male suicides, often of people who know they're different from the 'standard view of masculinity' but who can't challenge their peers, but equally can't cope with living a lie, and feel that running away, or ending their lives, is preferable to either facing up to society, or having to hide themselves within it.

We need young men to know they don't have to conform to one particular ideal of masculinity. We need illustrations, examples, of men who don't conform to strict gender norms. I'm not talking here of the likes of David Bowie or Eddie Izzard, as they take the idea of masculinity and completely subvert it – that doesn't help the ranks of everyday men leading ordinary mundane lives who don't want to rock the boat too much. It's not just strict gender norms in the sense of pushing the limits on what's acceptable in terms of gender itself, but also in behaviour. Highlighting that you don't need to be an alpha male. You don't need to be the lion. You don't need to spend your time trying to be "funny" and make yourself the centre of attention. You don't need to be controversial to be a man. You don't need to be a dick to be a man. You don't need to be a pisshead. You don't need to like sports. You don't need to feel like you have to dominate women all the time. You don't need to wear a suit. You don't need to always have the last word. You're still a man.

People like Russell Howard – an everyday bloke but not ... creepy. Andy Murray too.

Related is what is commonly known as 'white male privilege', I can't hide this fact so I'm not going to; it's uncomfortable to bring it up because I know it just makes me sound elitist, but I think sometimes I guess I may need to use it to my / our / everyone's advantage:

I am white. I am male, I am middle-class. I am affluent. I went to a private school. I had a slightly unorthodox family in childhood but it was probably even more "good" than being in a two-parent family never mind a one-parent family. I can easily pass for both Christian and Heterosexual. In essence, I am "the establishment". I'm closer to being "Tory Boy" than probably most of your friends.

And yet. And yet I'm not. But the actions of people like Trump, Weinstein, even Saville, etc reflect badly on people like me. I have much more in common with them in terms of background, lifestyle etc, than most people do – they give people like me a bad name and I don't really know what to do about it.

The issue that this relates to my previous comment is, because of our similarities, it's hard for me to come across as different. Because there are no adverts, no role models, well no that's not quite true but certainly no mental stimuli, to say that middle-class middle-aged white men can be anything other than party animals and misogynistic leeches. If you're not "one of them", then as I say, you're not a man. Until that changes, until men feel like they can speak out and challenge what it means to 'be a man', that masculinity is more than the narrow path that's common laid out, then people like Weinstein will always get away with it.

There's of course another aspect to this, and that's how women see men. One of the more controversial hashtags of recent times has been #NotAllMen – an attempt by men to defend themselves against accusation and distrust of men by women; men can't seem to believe that women don't trust them because they're the 'nice guys' and that not every man is a bastard out to get them.

While statistically true (the majority of men don't harass, abuse, rape or murder people), it's not a terribly constructive way of dealing the issue. Rather, it's an attempt to change the terms of reference of the debate from one of women going 'there is a problem with (some) men here' to one

of men going ‘how dare you tar us all with the same brush; it’s basically your fault for finding the bad men’.

Note the word ‘some’, by the way. Men tend to read any statement by women about men as applying to the whole of the species; in reality it’s a bit like someone saying ‘I’m a bit scared of spiders because they’re venomous’. They know the majority of spiders are pretty harmless, but they don’t know which ones they are, so for protection they avoid all of them until they learn more and feel comfortable around a specific individual.

And therein lies an issue. For all of those men saying “I’m a nice guy” – prove it. Prove to the world you’re worth trusting. Prove to the world you’re not just saying it to get inside a woman’s knickers. See, you might well be a nice guy – indeed I am sure you are – but the only person in the world who knows that right now ... is you. I know I’d never intentionally make a woman feel uncomfortable, but I equally know that any random woman I see on a train, or in a restaurant, or passing by in the street, doesn’t know this – the only thing they have to go on is that I’m a man and therefore a potential threat just by existing. And the longer that the male patriarchy exists in its current form, holding us down as well as women, and the longer we as men don’t challenge it, the longer this situation, and these feelings, will stay and the harder they will be to knock down. For each day that men in powerful positions use their privilege to their advantage and repress everyone, men and women, who don’t follow their tone, the more entrenched it gets.

Toxic masculinity thus affects men in two ways – directly, because men are peer-pressurised to meet the ‘male standard’, and criticised when they don’t – and indirectly, because the actions of the ‘alpha males’ affect how the world sees all men, not just those specific individuals. It’s up to us to change this. Ready, Player One?

{pause}

So what does that have to do with my current feelings of self-identity? Well, we’ll find out, after this break.

{jingle}

{

Voiceover : Are you happy with your wash?

Woman : No

Voiceover : Can you often smell a stale odour while ironing?

Woman : Yes

Voiceover : A smell like the clothes haven't been washed properly?

Woman : Yes

Voiceover : *{slight pause}* TOUGH!!

2nd Voiceover : Buy Brand X washing powder. Just as good as anything else you can buy.

{click}

{fantasy music in background}

Voiceover : From the author who brought you a series of Strange Stories and A Tale Of Two Princes comes a collection of ten classic fairytale retellings, twisted, as only Victoria Pearson can.

Find out why you should always be careful what you wish for, why you shouldn't trust Hansel & Gretel just because they look sweet, and why you really, really, don't want to displease Mr Elffe?

Grab some iron to ward off the Shining Ones, and some salt to keep the fairies away. Keep a tight hold of your name as we head into the woods and see what happened ... Once Upon A Twisted Fairytale.

Out now in ebook and paperback; audiobook coming soon.

{click}

Voiceover : To test a washing powder, you need two samples. I have two samples in my hand right now. One will be washed in Brand X washing powder. The other one will be washed in Persic. How will the Persic respond?

{washing machine noises}

Voiceover : As we can see, the sample washed in Brand X still shows some evidence of faint stains. Whereas the Persic oh.

2nd Voiceover : Buy Brand X washing powder. Not only is it just as good as anything else on the market, it is also four pence cheaper.

{click}

{background jingle, something lovely-dovey}

Voiceover : Ahh, February 14th. Valentine's Day. A day for lovers, for romantics, for spending special time with your partner and doing all that sickly-sweet stuff you need an excuse to.

{needle on record player}

Or you could choose QuirkyAlone. If you enjoy being single, but are not opposed to being in a relationship, and prefer being single to dating purely for the sake of being in a couple, then this is the movement for you. It's a mindset. It's about finding happiness within yourself and learning how to bring that happiness into a relationship, and developing connections. It's about being connected to yourself so that you can connect to others and be your real, true, quirky self. Quirkyalone is also about community: valuing the significant others in your life and knowing that those relationships are important too.

International Quirkyalone Day (Feb. 14) is a do-it-yourself celebration of romance, friendship, and independent spirit. It's a celebration of all kinds of love: romantic, platonic, familial, and yes, self-love. International Quirkyalone Day is not anti-Valentine's Day. It's NOT a pity party for single people. It's an alternative—a feel-good alternative to the marketing barrage of Valentine's Day and an antidote to the silicone version of love presented in shows such as The Bachelor.

It just happens to fall on the same day as Valentine's Day. That's our story and we're sticking to it!

Celebrate International Quirkyalone Day on February 14th, and Be You For You.

{click}

1st Man : Sir, sir! Are you the person in charge of new washing powders?

2nd Man : I am, yes.

1st Man : Boy, have I got a treat in store for you.

2nd Man : Areole Hyper? Isn't that a non-biodegradable?

Scientist : Surely you mean a non-biological?

2nd Man : Whatever. I don't know if we can recommend a non-bio.

1st Man : You must.

2nd Man : Well, we can give it a try, but I'm not convinced.

{pause}

2nd Man : Ah, ha! I knew it wouldn't shift the stain.

Scientist : No, this is the Areole Hyper.

2nd Man : {after a long pause} Well, at least it's got rid of the stain.

Voiceover : Buy Brand X washing powder. Not only is it just as good as anything else on the market, and also four pence cheaper, but it doesn't turn your clothes pink!

}

{jingle}

Welcome back to the pod. M'arvellous.

In part one we looked at self-confidence and my irk at masculinity, but how do these fit into my developing feelings of self-identity? Well, I have the pandemic to thank for this, in a way.

See, I've recently bought some new clothing. You may have seen a couple of posts on Instagram about them; mainly they're quite baggy shirts in a variety of shades of hippie, as well as a flannel plaid shirt that one of my friends says makes me look like a lesbian. I've also bought a couple of colourful face-masks. I figure if I have to wear them, they might as well be bright, funky, and make a point. You know, a bit like I do with my toenails, but even more so.

The thing about all the shirts is that they're quite ... gender-neutral. In the sense that they wouldn't seem awkward worn on either women or men – the flannel shirt indeed is designed as a female shirt with the buttons on the wrong side and no breast pocket, the latter might vaguely annoy me at some point. Also, they're quite oversized and my intention is to wear them as over-shirts, unbuttoned, as a kind of fashion style. It largely matches a vibe from this time last year, when I bought a couple of vibrant, funky, and female leggings to go running in.

This feeling of gender-neutrality is kind of important to me. In a way it always was, I just didn't realise it. For instance, when I was travelling around the world back in 2014, my standard clothing included a pair of blue denim jeans with turn-ups just below the knee. Apparently this is a stereotypical 'queer feminine' clothing style, a fact I was not previously aware of, and would have been confused even if I had known as I'd borrowed them off my then girlfriend, who as far as I know is not particularly 'queer'. But yes, they were nominally women's jeans. They fitted fine. They had pockets. I was happy. And that look, mixed with the short-sleeved shirts, the bare feet, and the painted toenails, was always one I felt really at home with and made me look, well, more aesthetically appealing than I normally do.

A couple of years ago, I had conversations with another of my friends, Jax, who is GenderFluid and thus has some experience with coming to terms with self-identity. At the time I was musing about how I was presenting myself, and how there were certain aspects of being a man that physically I wasn't happy or comfortable with – mainly, it must be said, body hair, which has its functionality (as is evidenced by current weather conditions), but I have rather more of it than I'd ideally like. Plus it's dark, so really visible. I never liked showing off my legs and tended to avoid anything other than full-length trousers partly for that reason, and after I discovered my liking for three-quarter-length / capri trousers I'd often run my beard trimmer up my legs (as far as the knees) to clear the hair a bit. Anyway, going through these thoughts with them helped me develop my thoughts and feelings a bit, and allowed me to realise that I could experiment more, and try things out to see how I felt about them.

I must say at this point, the majority of having a male body is fine. I love the efficiency of its waste disposal tube, and the lack of chest mounds makes running much easier and safer, especially for someone with a lack of balance like me. And the less said about the monthly march of the red army, the better. It's just ... little things I'd tweak.

In the middle of last year, I joined the Discord server for the Sounds Fake But Okay podcast. Now, the podcast and discord themselves are, as previously mentioned (as recently as Episode 32), primarily concerned with asexuality and aromanticism. However, there's statistically a large overlap between asexuality and querying of gender identity (a survey by the 'Asexual Community Survey Team' in 2018, suggested that 25% of asexuals identified as a non-binary-scope identity directly, while about a quarter of people who identified as women, and 30% of those who identified as men, also felt they were further questioning their identity beyond their binary gender. A further survey in 2020, run by The Trevor Project – an organisation that focuses on suicide prevention in LGBTQIA+ youth – suggested that around 25% of all LGBTQIA+ identified as a flavour of non-binary, rising to 41% amongst asexuals.

As to why this would be the case, a couple of discordians suggest that if people come to accept their sexuality as being unusual and off-kilter, they're more open to thinking deeply about other parts of their life and identity). As such, there's been a large number of discussions between everyone where we've all been learning much more from each other about how we think and act, and realising that certain things we've thought haven't been 'one off weird concepts' but part of an overall pattern. Like my dislike of excessive body hair, which, by virtue of being one aspect of masculinity, connects well with my preference for gender-neutral and baggy clothing, my toenail varnish, my tendency to feel far more comfortable in the company of female friends, and indeed my distaste for the way masculinity itself is presented.

I didn't appreciate or realise any of this until these past couple of months. I'll be honest, I never really thought it was a conversation or thought process it was applicable for me to have.

See, in part this was because of maybe a misunderstanding as to what gender non-binary was. When I first came across the term I always assumed it was a synonym for Intersex, or rather, the opposite, literally having neither male nor female characteristics. Then I thought it was something you actively had to be transitioning to, with some kind of drug.

Turns out, it's a state of mind rather than a state of body. It is true there's a certain stereotypical non-binary aesthetic, as the majority of people who identify as non-binary have female bodies – a survey by Kieran Todd et al. From 2019 in vol 4 issue 1 of "Transgender Health" found that two-thirds of non-binary respondents were AFAB. This leads to an assumption that non-binary is 'feminine-lite', and thus much of the resource and advice aimed at non-binary people being ways to 'appear more masculine', 'cut your hair short', 'wear men's clothes', 'wear less make-up'. None of this is helpful for achieving a non-binary aesthetic coming from the other direction.

Thing is as well, women have been dressing in a gender-neutral way for decades – think of American singer Patti Smith on the cover of her 'Horses' album, for instance, and that was back in 1973 – while because male fashion is itself quite boring and, in a manner of speaking, gender-neutral (or at least it is now), Male enbies end up going one of three ways – still looking like men, or edging too much towards drag, or looking like a time-traveller from the early 1800s, rocking the Romantic Hero look.

None of this is really my aesthetic. Even in the height of my masculinity I didn't wear suits (which is a common AFAB enby look); I'm much more of a hippie, hence my recent purchases of baggy and flannel shirts instead. Casual, rather than formal. One could argue though that the relative

blandness of masculine clothing (beige, blue, grey, black, white: less colour than the asexual pride flag) means that any variation could be seen as 'gender non conforming', although the issue that men have is, because of strict definitions of masculinity as well as a general lack of understanding as to the concept of non-binary, wearing outlandish clothes gives more of a signal of 'gay man' than 'enby regardless of sexual attraction'.

There's no reason why men can't identify as non-binary. Indeed in the last couple of years, leading British pop star Sam Smith has 'come out' as non-binary and uses they/them pronouns, making them one of the most notable enbies in modern culture. It's just that toxic masculinity largely prevents men from feeling comfortable thinking about this. It's hard enough coming to terms with a different sexuality, never mind questioning your entire gender outlook. Remember, 'you're not a red-blooded man, you're just a woman in disguise'. Any deviation from the 'norms' of masculinity is criticised, clamped down on, beaten out of you – and being gay, being non-binary, being in any way transgender, even if you're still bodily male, makes you 'a woman' and therefore inferior. It's unsurprising therefore that in a study conducted in 2018 by the American Academy of Pediatrics, 41.8% of non-binary youth (aged 11-19) surveyed had stated they had attempted suicide – likely the majority because both sides of the patriarchy look down on the concept.

I'm kind of privileged in that way I guess, because I'm that much older – I've not got a need to 'impress' anyone, it doesn't matter anywhere near as much if I 'toe the line'. But it's people like me, people like Sam Smith, like the poet Kae Tempest, who can act as role models for the next generations, to show that their feelings are valid and that, yes, you can be who you feel you really are.

I am not a role model. The idea is weird to me. But there we go.

The problem here in general though is one of visibility. People can't relate to you, or to an identity at all, if they don't know you, it exists, if they don't know what they feel is valid, and while it's great that people can 'come out' as a sexual or gender orientation, it doesn't mean squat if the majority of the population don't notice.

This is something I've spoken about before, with regard to asexuality; how being asexual makes it easy to 'hide in plain sight', and 'pass' as cishet-but-just-single. I've walked through cities with the ace flag on my backpack, an ace-themed sweatshirt and, more recently, the ace-flag as a face mask, and no-one's noticed. My other new face-mask is in the colours of the non-binary flag, and again, no-one's even looked at me curiously, never mind commented on it. In a way it makes me feel kind of 'safe', like it's a secret code that only people who know about it will get, but equally it means that the level of visibility for these identities is really low, so people who may be having the same thoughts don't realise their thoughts are valid, and spend their lives unhappy, angsty, desperate for answers and confused as to why they're 'broken'.

I actually did a poll on my IG stories while wearing my enby face mask. I asked my followers, not 'what does this represent', but more vaguely 'if you saw someone wearing these colours, would you assume they were significant?'. 49% of my followers said yes, 51% said 'naw, they're just pretty colours'.

This led me to write a blog post recently on many of the different Pride flags – those associated with several of the gender and sexual orientations that people identify with but which people may only have vaguely heard the names of in passing. I probably ought to record myself on video doing it as a kind of stand-up comedy regime, but we all know that won't ever happen. It's hard to recreate in purely audio form, since flags by their very nature are visual, but I'll talk about a couple here. One thing to note though: we're awfully fond of stripes. We may be Queer, but our flags are mostly

Straight.

The most obvious is the non-binary flag itself. "Just Pretty Colours". I mean, your mileage may vary, but it's better than many of the orientation flags. It's made up of four equal stripes across, which from the top down are: bright yellow, white, purple, black. The bright yellow dominates, tbh. It feels a little like someone got bored of the Asexual Pride Flag, and wanting to make it more lively, swapped the colours around and applied a liberal amount of day-glo paint, or gave it a hi-viz hat. It's quite disjointed in a way; you feel like you could see it from 100 metres away down a dark street. Not masculine, not feminine, not going to be hit by a car.

Non-Binary is made up of several sub-categories, each of which has its own flag, and of course they all have a myriad of stripes. The sub-cat I identify with is known as Demiboy, which is an awful-sounding name. It feels a bit like a cut-price budget-supermarket own-brand superhero: is it a bird? Is it a plane? Oh wait, no, it's a bird, there's demiboy jogging coming up the hill, looking exhausted. "Oh Demiboy, can you save my cat who's stuck up the tree?" "Nah, that's a job for the fire brigade with their long ladders." "Oh, is that because you're Demiboy and feel that rescuing a cat is a traditionally masculine endeavour and you're objecting out of principle because you don't want to conform to gender stereotypes?" "Nah, I'm just scared of heights."

Demiboy, and the related Demigirl, reflect that some people do identify with the gender binary, but only partially. This may or may not be the gender they were assigned at birth, and in addition they may or may not identify partly as another gender. That said, it is most commonly represented as someone sitting between their birth gender and non-binary; indeed many demis also consider themselves to be non-binary. Since, technically, any querying of your gender makes you able to validly claim to be demi, this suggests there's probably an awful lot of possible demiboys and demigirls in the population who ... simply would never know.

This is where I feel I sit because I'm not strongly aligned to any gender (I've been known to say my gender is 'meh' and my pronouns are 'whatever you like, but call me she/her and you'll be provably wrong and we'll all laugh at you'), but I have a male body and, as discussed earlier, I'm mostly all right with it. The changes I'd make to it wouldn't be to make it more female, just more ... androgynous. Like a Numanoid, but with less late 70s dystopia vibe. Definitely a hippie.

The flags might well put you off though. The demiboy flag is a lot of thin, equal stripes – from the top down they are : dark grey, light grey, pale blue, white, pale blue, light grey, dark grey. It's quite busy, yes. I liken it to someone taking the flag of Argentina, letting the edges get a bit mucky, over-washing it with cheap washing powder so residual stains remain, then hanging it out to dry in the hot sun for too long, letting it fade.

The demigirl flag is the same, except replace the flag of Argentina with the flag of Austria – pale red instead of pale blue.

The final identity I want to mention is Agender. This is often what people think of when they hear 'non-binary', and it's defined as genderlessness, or 'a lack of gender'. If non-binary is a spectrum of identities that sit between the gender binary, these people sit almost outside that spectrum, in the same way that asexuals sit 'outside' the sexual orientation spectrum. They tend to identify as 'human' or 'a person', rather than any definition that refers to gendered identity.

Some notable people to have 'come out' as agender include the actor Ezra Miller, rapper Angel Haze, and author/activist sj Miller.

The flag ... isn't very interesting. Again, a large number of equally-sized thin stripes across, from the

top down: black, grey, white, pale green, white, grey, black. What? It reminds me a little of the display on a broken television; I just want to slap the top of the flag to get the picture back. Even traditionally masculine clothing is more colourful and interesting than this.

So, to sum up, TL;DL as they might say on a podcast, I'm kind of non-binary. I'm musing about using Barefoot Backpacker as a name rather than just a brand, to reflect this change in identity, but while a gender-neutral name, it's a very weird one (even if some of my friends call me 'Barefoot' anyway, despite knowing my real name. "You look like a Barefoot" said one. What?). And it's not like I have an objection to my real name (albeit that it's a fake one anyway given my surname was changed when I was three years old), just that sometimes it's nice to have a more comfortable and all-encompassing identity. You'll notice, though, historically, I almost never use my real name – for years it wasn't on my website and it's not in the intro on my podcast. This is because I never saw it as important; no-one needs to know what it is as, to all intents and purposes, I am my brand, but now with my recent realisations, it's another interesting aspect, another weird connection that links all these separate concepts.

Note that I am currently wearing socks. It is below freezing point.

{standard section separation jingle}

Well that's all the self-revelation for this pod. Next time I'll return to talking about travel, with my long-expected pod looking at other types of alcohol around the world, from the best spirits and the finest discoveries, to possibly the most unlikely place you might find a tippie. I know this because I've started to write it already. The pod after that will be on snow, because of course it will be.

Until then, remember, you are valid, and if you're feeling off colour, keep on getting better.

{Outro theme tune, same as intro, just a different bit of it}

{Outro voiceover:

Thank you for listening to this episode of Travel Tales From Beyond The Brochure. I hope you enjoyed it; if you did, don't forget to leave a review on your podcast site of choice. I'm pretty bad at that sort of thing myself, so I'll understand perfectly if you don't.

Travel Tales From Beyond The Brochure was written, presented, edited, and produced in the Sheffield studio by The Barefoot Backpacker. Music in this episode was "Walking Barefoot On Grass (Bonus)" by Kai Engel, which is available via the Free Music Archive, and used under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

Previous episodes will be available on your podcast service of choice, or alternatively on my website: barefoot-backpacker.com. If you want to contact me, I live on Twitter @rtwbarefoot, or you can e-mail me at info@barefoot-backpacker.com.

Until next week, have safe journeys. Bye for now.}