

Enka's gender and name F.A.Q.¹

So what's the deal?

I'm changing my first name, at least socially (it will take time to do it administratively because France is not great with this kind of thing, and doing it socially first helps).

What's the new name then?

The new name is Enka (hence "Enka Blanchard" with my last name). It's pronounced like it's written (the "en" of "enter" and the "ka" of "captain").

Why change it?

I'm changing it because I've never felt comfortable with either of the names given to me at birth. Especially not with the associated diminutives. One of the things I dislike about it is that it is very gendered. It is also pronounced or spelled in quite a few different ways depending on where you are.

But is it worth changing it?

Well, I don't believe that it's such a big thing (except for the administration). But yes, it simply makes me noticeably happier to be called that way. So, big gains for a relatively small price, why not do it?

Didn't you already change your name?

In a way, and it's a bit more complicated than that. I had a pseudonym when I was busking and had an active presence as an artist, which was Koliaza. Most people knew me under that name, which was fine. That started more than twelve years ago. But I don't use it professionally anymore, it is quite a mouthful, and most people have a problem with using pseudonyms instead of names.

I also started spelling my original first name differently a couple of years ago in an effort to be less gendered. This helped a bit, but created an even bigger mess administratively. As I'm still living in France, it is still very gendered, and people still use the nicknames I dislike. So I'm opting for a more radical change.

Wait, what's all this deal with being gendered?

Well, it should not really be a surprise but I'm not a dude. I've identified as non-binary for a little while now. And I've been public about it since 2017, and increasingly vocal.

Isn't that just a joke?

Nope, despite the numerous comments I've received about it that assumed that. There's nothing quite like going to a conference and being asked by a colleague whether you've lost a bet because of the clothes you choose to wear or the ribbon in your hair.

¹ Which is in English, because most French speakers I know speak English, but I know a lot of people who don't speak French.

What does it mean then?

It means that I'm not comfortable being gendered like a man. I have never really felt like one, and yes, it's partially linked to my disability. However, I don't really feel like a woman either (although being gendered like one bothers me less than the alternative). I could go into way more details but this is supposed to be a short F.A.Q.

Since when have you known?

That's the actual issue, and why it's linked to my disability. I've hated my body and presentation for a very long time. But I had very good reasons to (after all, it's quite a shitty body and doesn't even let me move around easily without pain or fear). I've had thoughts that I now know were clues of this for at least a dozen years, maybe more (but my memory is fuzzy beyond that so I don't know). I've known for a few years, after a few years of wondering about it.

If you've known for so long and have been public about your gender for a while, why change the name just now?

I've been through some pretty nasty stuff over the past few years, while trying to write my PhD (and radically changed the field of my dissertation slightly more than a year before having to send the complete version for review). I knew that some things needed looking into, but didn't have the time or energy for it, hence doing it now that I'm in a more relaxed atmosphere. I've been using an alternate spelling of my original name for a while, and recently noticed that it wasn't quite enough. Also, it will help people gender me correctly, because a neat distinction makes it easier to change habits.

So why Enka?

Well, it's actually a call back to how I used to sign things. But mostly I think it sounds nice, and isn't too gendered (and if so, mostly with a feminine bias which bothers me less).

Is Enka even a real name?

I had to look it up to check when I chose it but yes, although it's very rare. I only found it in two countries (and it's rare in both): Finland, where it's a male name, and Japan, where it's a female name. The cool thing is that it coincidentally also has a meaning in Japanese, where Enka used to denote a musical genre linked to speech songs and protest songs.

How do you know it's real?

The problem was that I thought those feelings were entirely caused by my disability. So, for the longest time I wondered whether they were real, or just me trying to claim another label to be "special". And this is not irrelevant self doubt: I've been accused of doing this just to draw attention to myself, by family and colleagues, so I'm quite sensitive about this. Anyway, at some point I decided I would try changing how people gender me within my close friend circle, and found that I felt much better. So in my case, it's not so much gender dysphoria as gender euphoria (that's actually the technical term for it, which is neat) that was the litmus test. I still hate my body, but I feel a bit better with it now.

What happens in practice then?

In practice, it means that trying to gender me correctly would be nice. Using Enka instead of previous names is a good first step. When it comes to pronouns, I use singular they in English and like it very much.

Wait, isn't that an ugly neologism? They means it's plural, no?

Well, singular they (when you don't know the person's gender or don't want to indicate it) has been in common use for longer than singular you, by about a [century](#). It's been used regularly for many centuries before some grammarians with little linguistic knowledge decided it wasn't correct, and is being used more and more nowadays.

And what happens in French or other gendered languages?

That's the annoying thing. I haven't found a good solution yet. Some friends use iel, or ille, or ul, but they still sound a bit wrong to my ears. It is one of the reasons why I like English so much. One option is to alternate between genders and I'm fine with that if you're good at it, but it's generally quite tough and can be confusing. In the meantime, I think gendering me in the feminine form is the easiest, so you should probably try to do that.

That sounds hard, but I'll try, so don't get upset at me.

Well, I don't tend to get upset at people in general, except when I think they are either trying to get to me on purpose, or trying to avoid the subject to make it go away. And basically every trans person around me reacts in a similar way. So unless you get it wrong every single time, the most I'll do is just give you a friendly reminder. People tend to be afraid of getting it wrong, but I know it takes some effort, especially at the beginning. Due to online scare tactics, people like me are sometimes accused of being the PC police, which I don't think is deserved (that said, there are nasty people in every community). We do fight to get some basic amount of respect, and there's a difference between getting it wrong half the time at first and making a point to never use the right name or pronouns. Cisgender people tend to be upset when someone misgenders them. Try using only feminine adjectives, nouns and pronouns for a man, and he will often get upset within the first few times you do so and consider it really disrespectful (women might be less sensitive, but not impervious). Imagine being on the receiving end of this all the time.

I'm so sorry, I keep misgendering you or using the wrong name, and you had to remind me!

Don't make a scene, no need for apologies. It's fine, just go with the flow, and try to get a bit better at it in the future. I don't want to have to make the effort to tell you that you are still a decent human being each time you make a small mistake and start making a subject out of it. That can actually become pretty annoying if it happens all the time.

I just heard you use a pronoun for yourself which isn't the one you're claiming, isn't that a proof that it's all fake?

Well, there are multiple explanations. I've been using wrong pronouns for myself for more than two decades, and am still sometimes forced to use them in certain contexts. So even I make mistakes, and yes, it annoys me (it's hard to unlearn two decades of daily practice).

Also, maybe the person in front of me doesn't know for a good reason (like them being a transphobe with the ability to make my life harder), or I don't want them to make a scene.

But what if we're in public? Do I have to use your first name and pronouns with people in the street or colleagues?

That would be appreciated. I don't want it to be treated like a dirty secret. If people think it's weird, I'll probably deal with it myself but would appreciate your support in just respecting me in front of others. I realise that it can be tough in certain environments but consider the difference between having to show you're supporting and respecting someone who's trans, and being the trans person. And if I am ever in a situation where I don't want you to reveal my transidentity, I will let you know in advance.

So wait, you're trans too?

Yes. I'm using that word, as well as the word transgender, in their general meanings. I'm not the gender that was assigned to me at birth. So I'm not cisgender, and I'm transgender. But I am not a trans woman or a trans man.

Does that mean that you'll transition?

It's complicated. Transitioning can mean many things. Changing my name, my pronouns and my appearance are some aspects of it. The medical stuff is tougher. For one, some hormonal therapies might have extremely adverse effects on my health because of my disability. So I hadn't really considered the possibility until recently. Moreover, I promised myself years ago that I would never have another surgery unless my life was threatened (because of my experience with the ones I had as a teenager).

Wouldn't it be simpler to ignore it? It's just your appearance after all.

My appearance affects how people view me and how they interact with me. It affects my feelings and my perception of who I am, and if I ever follow some therapy (hormonal or other), it will affect much more than my appearance. This has an impact on my mental health. I am aware that it's riskier on multiple fronts to come out as trans and potentially to transition medically if I ever do. But not doing it is costly too, mostly to my mental health.

You say it's risky. How risky is it, and are you willing to risk that much (potentially your health) for your appearance? Doesn't that sound extreme and dumb?

I've been to more than forty countries, including some where the trip was pretty stupidly difficult or dangerous for a disabled person. I've given talks on vote buying, while wearing a dress, in Russia. There are things I believe in, and I now believe that living without hiding those things is worth the cost. Also, I'm relatively privileged right now and have some support, so I can handle some of what is thrown at me. And I think it's partially my duty to be a visible target so I can defuse some issues and try to educate people when others like me are at a higher risk. I can only be what I am publicly because others took risks in the past.

If you care about your appearance so much, why don't you: shave your beard/wear this make-up/do X?

Well, it's a touchy subject. Some things affect my own perception of myself, or my comfort. For example, I find dresses much comfier than other garments. I'm also not trying to be

either entirely feminine or masculine. Some gendered things are fine, some are harder. I don't mind having a beard, or having no beard, but seeing it grow is not something I like (so I generally let it grow for a little while). Moreover, it's hard to make big changes and spend time and effort on something when you know that you probably won't succeed. I discarded my transidentity for a while because I thought I could not act upon it anyway (because of the disability), and that if I ever tried to do something it would be much harder to be detached and not suffer from it. So not trying to alter the presentation is a way to avoid caring about it, which can be useful if I think I can't be satisfied with the result. I am changing my mind about that, but it's still complicated.

Have there been professional consequences?

So far, not really. I'm very lucky to have some pretty nice colleagues. My first PhD advisor learned that I was non-binary because he sent an email asking for people's genders on a form, with more than two possibilities (the second advisor was also fine with it). The first conference at which I was visibly trans and at which I spoke openly about it was co-organised by a very supportive colleague (Jacques Lévy) on whom I knew I could count. The head of the project I'm currently a part of gave me her support when she learned about it, so I have people who have tried to shield me from the main effects of transphobia.

The problem is that the supporting people were necessary. When the form mentioned above was sent, there were more people wondering (or complaining) about the decision to include "other" as a gender than people who answered "other" (and a high probability that at least some of the people who wrote other did so as a joke). My current team leader had to dismiss some remarks from people objecting to how I was dressed (which was "better than the person complaining, but not following gender norms").

And will it affect your future, professionally?

Well, one thing that helped me be lucky and avoid trouble so far is that I also practiced a decent amount of self-censorship. I didn't indicate my gender when I was recruited, because I felt that it was too risky. The same when I was supposed to supervise some interns. Most people might be okay with it, but there is still a solid chance that they're not, and I didn't want to bet my career on it.

I've been much more visible over the past 2 years, and still pretty lucky. Although I've had many invasive questions, I've never received direct threats or slurs in person (I had my fair share online, and one of my students told me in a friendly but serious tone that I'd go to hell). One way this is silly is that I will probably pay quite a cost when it comes to publication counts and this kind of metrics (but the earlier I change my name the lower the cost).

So why go public now?

Well, I have finished my studies, so I'm less at the mercy of a single biased person. I have also decided to be more public to do what I can to change things and shield others, as mentioned before. And finally, I decided to actually do some research on the intersections of disability and queerness, so it will soon be unavoidably public.

Aren't you biased, doing research on things that concern you so directly?

I am. I am also aware that more or less everyone is biased on those issues, so at least I can try to compensate for my own biases. And the field has been around for a few decades with

next to nobody actually looking at those issues. Someone should probably do it, so it might as well be me.

Are you going to change other things?

I don't know. The gender feels okay for now, so do the name and pronouns (at least in English). I recently found a nice doctor who's good on those issues (ask me if you need one), so I'm going to explore my options while taking my time. I don't think I will change gender markers on my passport because 1) it's a crazy amount of work, 2) I don't fit in the binary anyway so it's a small reward compared to the work, and 3) if they do include a third gender at some point, I really don't like the idea of being on an administrative list of people who don't fit in nice boxes. Ideally, I'd like passports not to show genders anymore, but that doesn't seem in the cards for now.

Are you trying to be a special snowflake?

Well, considering the costs I'm facing (and the anxiety it creates), if that were the case I'd probably have stopped by now. Also, all I'm asking is for you to try to use the right noun and pronoun and not make a scene about it. Which really doesn't seem more than the minimum amount of human decency.

Isn't this whole thing blown out of proportion?

If only. The questions I listed here are all ones that were asked. Generally to me, in some rare cases to people around me. I'd love not to make an issue out of this, but for that a few things should probably change. Trans rights are still frequently questioned, including by people who should be defending them (like quite a few so-called radical feminists who are close to conservative Christian movements). If I could just say "Hi, I'm Enka, I'm non-binary and I use the pronoun they" and leave it at that it would be lovely. The pushback I get is why I wrote this, and why I'm a bit more vocal, to try to normalise it.

But won't normalising that make more people trans?

Maybe. Or maybe it'll just make more people visibly trans instead of self-loathing and in the closet. The epidemic of transness we see is most probably due to people being able to say that about themselves and live in peace rather than have to hide it or kill themselves.

Aren't you dramatising a bit?

That was not an overstatement. In many countries (including ones where it shouldn't be the case), trans life expectancy can be half of that of cis people. In the USA, more than 40% of non-binary youth attempted suicide (which doesn't include those who succeeded without their families noticing they were non-binary) and nearly 70% have considered it. Still in the USA, 20 to 40% of trans youth have been homeless. As far as I know, we don't have equivalent studies in France so we don't know the exact numbers. And that's before getting to the issues of sexual abuse, which are even worse.

Well, in any case, we're only talking about small minorities, right?

We don't know. Depending on where you ask the question and to whom, the proportion of trans and non-binary people can be higher than 15%. Or lower than 0.1%. It's a mess, mostly because most people are closeted. But also because it interacts with other aspects of

our lives. For example, there are very few trans people with a physical disability. Just because of the sheer amount of trans people I've met, and of disabled people I've met, I should know more than a few. I don't. For all I know, I could be one of the only ones in France (we should be either hundreds or thousands, depending on how you count and low statistical accuracy). Even worldwide, I've only heard of very few people who might fit the bill. Which is why I recently started looking at all of this from a research perspective.

Shit. So what should we do?

Learn about those issues. I am ready to discuss it with you if you want, but I appreciate you trying to document yourself first, there are [many resources online](#) ([fewer](#) in [French](#) but still a few). Try to make your environment more welcoming. This is not that easy, but basically making it known that you support trans rights will greatly increase the chances of people coming to see you to say how you can help in practice. Some policies are misguided though. Asking people their pronouns can seem good, but it can push people to out themselves in potentially hostile environments.

Is that all?

Not entirely, but it's all for now (and honestly, this document is long enough as it is). But I've been working and writing about those issues for a while and relevant papers should be online on my website if they aren't already (about subjects such as coming to terms with disability and transidentity, the lack of representation of people who are both crip and queer, crips' relationships to space, or temporal taxes, see www.koliaza.com/research). You can also ask me to send you stuff if you want anything in particular.

I have another question.

Put it in the comments here and I'll answer it.