Teaching Trans Students, Teaching Trans Studies

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Feminist Teacher, Volume 27, Numbers 2-3, 2017, pp. 233-252 (Article)

Published by University of Illinois Press

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As trans studies becomes more deeply institutionalized as a field and trans visibility spikes in popular culture, more students come into our women's and gender studies (WGS) classrooms identifying as trans, genderqueer, or nonbinary, and they hope that our classrooms will be responsive to their experiences. At minimum, this requires that WGS instructors inquire about students' preferred names and pronouns and then use them properly (Spade, "Some Very Basic Tips"; Wentling). More broadly, trans students are also hoping to see themselves represented in course content, yet previous studies of the inclusion of trans material in WGS courses found trans-inclusion to be patchy at best, as I describe more fully below.

In part, WGS as a field seems to have positioned trans studies as a trendy new topic or subfield within feminist and queer scholarship. For example, there have been numerous ads for tenure-track jobs in WGS in the last two years that have included "trans or disability studies" among the specializations sought, pairing these fields as if they're interchangeable options for increasing the diversity of WGS curricular offerings. Instead of thinking of trans studies as a subset of feminist theory, I suggest that we instead think of trans, feminist, and queer studies as three angles of vision on a similar set of problems of gender and sexuality. There are significant overlaps in what we can see from each approach, yet each approach also illuminates something the others aren't able to see. Though each body of literature operates through a unique theoretical framework, their overlaps necessitate that they all be woven together throughout the WGS curriculum.

Additionally, conversations with some colleagues have left me with the impression that trans students and trans material are perceived to be taking up too much space in the WGS classroom and curriculum, displacing the needs of cis women students. Though I don't want to dismiss an intersectional critique of young trans men (and butches, for that matter) enacting male or masculine privilege in the WGS classroom, we also need to be attentive to the larger context of how trans students come into our classes. They bring an intensity to our classes because there aren't a lot of other spaces in their lives where

they feel respected and understood. And, as I detail below, many of the frustrations WGS instructors are experiencing with queer and trans students can be understood with the help of theories that apply to undergraduate pedagogy across the curriculum. In other words, our queer and trans students are exhibiting similar resistance as our most normative students; they're just expressing it through different language.

Though trans students have many of the same problems grappling with material as do other students—an attachment to liberal individualism, ahistorical use of terms, a frequent lack of awareness of the limits of their own experience—my conversations with colleagues have left me with the impression that WGS instructors are, in some cases, more likely to project their reservations about trans identity more broadly onto trans students' expressions of these issues. In other words, cis feminist students attached to liberal individualism and lacking historical analysis are more likely to be seen as simply naïve and educable; they're allowed to make claims about their bodies and identities that WGS instructors interpret as the idiosyncrasies of individual experience.[1] Trans students' claims about their bodies and identities, however, are more likely to be interpreted as claims about *gender* in ways that mirror how trans identity and trans studies are thought by some to be eroding the foundations of WGS scholarship and teaching (namely, a focus on women). The examples I offer highlight the similarities between trans and cis students' needs in WGS classes.

My discussion of this subject draws upon many layers of experience. The foundation of my thinking comes from conversations and observations over three years of applying for WGS tenure-track jobs as well as my experiences as a trans guy teaching WGS courses at three different universities. This includes many sections of Introduction to WGS, three semesters of introductory LGBT History, two semesters of Feminist Theory, and six upper-level WGS courses across three universities: Indiana University, where I completed my PhD; Butler University in Indianapolis, a small, private, liberal arts school; and Minnesota State University, Mankato, a mid-sized state school. Additionally, I have co-conducted several trainings on trans issues for student life staff, LGBT Center staff, law enforcement students, and groups of doctors and staff at university student health centers.

In many courses I've taught, I have not come out to my students as trans, though I assume they know that I'm gay. I often choose not to come out to introductory, general education classes in particular, for several reasons: first, it's hard to tell to what degree more reticent students are harboring hostility about the queer and feminist themes under discussion and the extent to which that hostility might become a more significant problem if I come out as trans. Second, if I were to come out to students unfamiliar with trans people, I expect they would spend several subsequent class sessions wondering how they didn't know that I was trans, trying to imagine what I looked like prior to transition, or otherwise distracted from course content. Finally, I feel like I can do more productive work with these students by modeling feminist masculinity than I can by coming out to them as trans. In upper-level and LGBT studies classes, however, I do come out to my students as trans, and the examples I discuss below are from courses where I have come out to my students as a queer trans guy.

In this article, I outline six central sticking points in teaching trans students, though these needs are not unique to trans students. With each section, I offer suggestions for trans studies material that addresses each of these concerns. Most WGS instructors are probably already teaching material that addresses most, if not all, of these emotional and intellectual sticking points, but the material may be framed through cis experiences. For trans students seeking insight and recognition in our classes, seeing only one day of readings about transness on the syllabus may indicate to them that trans concerns have not been adequately integrated into the curriculum. By integrating more trans studies material throughout the semester, you may be able to put trans students a bit more at ease. If this is the case, it'll be easier to help trans students see the value of cis feminist perspectives as well. Though some of my suggestions are more appropriate for an upper-division course like Feminist Theory on most campuses, most would also be useful for an introductory WGS course.

Common Approaches to Trans Inclusion

Previous scholarship on the integration of trans material in the WGS curriculum identifies two prominent obstacles to a more trans-inclusive pedagogy: the theoretical foundation for course design and the compartmentalization of trans material into a "trans day" or "trans week." First, WGS course design that focuses specifically on discussing the contributions, experiences, and voices of cis women has a difficult time integrating trans material. Such courses and textbooks often treat trans people as "additions or exceptions" to a course that otherwise focuses on cis women (Beauchamp and D'Harlingue 26; Drabinski 10). Alternatively, this approach sometimes uses trans people to illustrate exceptions to binary gender categories (Beauchamp and D'Harlingue 29–31; Courvant 26). Toby Beauchamp and Benjamin D'Harlingue instead recommend structuring courses to focus on how gendered subjects are produced by institutions (26). Kate Drabinksi additionally suggests teaching "trans" as a set of practices rather than an identity category (11).

In response to critiques such as Beauchamp and D'Harlingue's, some might object that trans scholarship erodes WGS's foundational focus on the experiences of women. However, it's important to note that their suggestion to emphasize how gendered subjects are produced by institutions doesn't mean that we have to stop talking about the issues of concern to cis women. Their approach is wholly compatible with extensive ongoing conversations about the classic issues covered in WGS courses. In fact, they found that Grewal and Kaplan's *Introduction to Women's Studies* textbook—which doesn't include *any* trans content—was more amenable to the approach they advocate than the textbooks that included some trans content.[2] Instead, by focusing on the production of gendered subjects, you can more adeptly draw connections between cis feminist and trans critiques of medical authority, between interpersonal and state violence against cis women and against trans people, between the ways in which childhood socialization into "princess" and "warrior" produces a whole host of sexist effects for cis girls and boys *and* requires that children not move between those categories.

Because an exceptionalizing framework cannot integrate trans material into

a larger discussion of the production of gender categories, it leaves singular readings about trans people to be treated as an extra set of facts, disconnected from the rest of the course content. Diana Courvant notes that this is part of a larger problem of "diversity pedagogy" (26). In this model, facts about trans people are included in course discussions or material, without interrogation of the power structures that police and punish gender non-normativity. Courvant offers several examples of how courses include trans content without integrating it into the main themes of the course. For example, she notes that a Race, Gender, and Power course deployed trans people to prove that sex and gender are socially constructed during a unit on interpersonal and state violence while failing to address the effects of violence on trans people (32).

Such "diversity pedagogy" approaches frequently compartmentalize trans material into a "trans week" or offer a personal narrative from a singular special guest speaker. In particular, trans material is often used to illustrate how gender is socially constructed (Beauchamp and D'Harlingue 38). If no additional trans content is included throughout the semester, this approach reinforces the transphobic idea that trans people's gender identities are artificial and fake while cis identities are real and natural. Accordingly, cis students may leave the class thinking that their own gender identities and presentations are biologically-determined, even though the existence of trans people demonstrates that it is possible for *some* people to defy biological programming and choose a gender.

Bringing in a trans guest speaker risks reproducing similar problems. In addition to reinforcing the sense that trans concerns are separate from the concerns of cis women, the "special guest" approach requires that guests display pain to elicit sympathy from cis audiences (Rand 40; Malatino 400–401). Erika Rand warns that this approach does not only apply to in-person special guests; she recounts an experience teaching *Stone Butch Blues* in which students treated the novel's protagonist as a "fictional special guest" (Rand 35–36). Whether in the form of a guest speaker, written nonfiction narrative, or novel, special guests are often expected to deliver a "coming-out story documenting movement through insecurity toward a public declaration of pride and self-love" (Malatino 400). This familiar narrative arc often captures cis students' attention by eliciting sympathy; it's all the more popular because it does not require cis students to critically interrogate the ways in which they have been produced as gendered subjects and have participated in policing gender nonnormativity (400–401).

All of the aforementioned approaches "other" trans studies material and trans people, isolating us to a week of discussion, a singular "voice," or an interesting set of facts to be consumed. Most importantly, these approaches cordon off any "gender trouble" presented by trans issues so as not to destabilize the naturalized identities of cis students, limiting learning for all our students. More to the point, if an implicit goal of teaching trans and queer students is to help them see the value of feminist thinking, segregating work that speaks most directly to their experiences is less likely to help them see the connections between cis feminist texts and trans texts. By mapping out a syllabus that interrogates how a variety of genders

are produced through a variety of institutions, trans and cis students alike may be better able to see the overlaps and divergences between their positioning within systems of gender regulation.

Need to Assert Expertise

Trans students' needs for affirmation go beyond being addressed by their preferred names and pronouns. One need I often feel from queer and trans students alike is the need to be acknowledged by a queer adult. This sometimes takes the form—on relatively LGBT-friendly campuses—of students naming their queerness vociferously during the first week of class. This problem isn't unrelated to students' need for a sense of community. Even on campuses with prominent LGBT Centers, I've found that LGB as well as trans students struggle to form meaningful friendships with other young queers. For example, in a 300-level class where nearly half of the thirty students seemed to be queer WGS majors, when we read S. Bear Bergman's *Butch Is a Noun*, some students commented, "I wish I knew how to find a community like the one he describes."

Beyond the need for community and basic respect for their names, though, trans students may feel that their identities are undermined in other ways, both in and out of the classroom. They are likely encountering friends and family members who dismiss their assertions of trans identity. This may be especially true for genderqueer or nonbinary students. At one training I conducted for staff at a student health center, one nurse pointedly asked me, "Aren't genderqueer people just confused?" For students who are more tentative in their identity development, these unintentionally aggressive questions from people in their lives may be part of the frustration and vulnerability they bring to class. In response to these disempowering experiences, trans students may invest a lot of effort in asserting their expertise on issues of gender and sexuality in our classes.

Accordingly, one of the sticking points I sometimes have with trans students, even in classes where I am out as a trans instructor, involve contestations over expertise. During one section of Gay Histories, Queer Cultures, I had a conflict with a trans student who I already knew from a trans advocacy committee on campus. His contributions to class were becoming increasingly derisive, so I asked to speak to him after class. As we were discussing the conflict, he said, "It's like you want to be the expert." I was offended by his suggestion that a PhD in gender studies didn't lend me some expertise that was different than his short-lived experience identifying as a trans guy.

The same semester, I heard Julian Gill-Peterson's presentation discussing trans youth writing to Harry Benjamin requesting help with transition. He noted that trans teens had to strike a delicate balance between claiming expertise on their own identities and requesting expert help from Benjamin (Gill-Peterson). I realized this expertise double-bind was part of what was at stake in my conflict with this student. In the midst of messages undermining their authority to claim a trans identity, students come into an LGBT studies class hoping to be affirmed as experts on LGBT issues. Being asked to think about privilege, intersectionality, and—even more provocatively—the identity-destabilizing claims of queer theory cuts against their hope that my class will be a space for the straightforward affirmation they seek.

I have less frequently experienced this sort of conflict with straight, cis-women students, but that seems to be an effect of my white, queer masculinity. Though a portion of my queer students are sometimes a bit antagonistic with me, straight women often seem quite engaged in my classes and more likely to seek me out for office hours than queer students. When female colleagues have taught a similar group of students, however, we have profoundly different experiences with classroom environment. Straight, cis-women seem more likely to be open to my course materials and willing to give me the benefit of the doubt than they are with my female colleagues. I think these students are less likely to resist me both because of the authority granted me as a result of white masculinity and because they are happy to see a feminist male authority figure. With my female colleagues, they seem more likely to act out "call out culture," jumping on any minor mistake or perceived slight, dumping their frustrations on a female authority figure in ways that seem similar to the kinds of antagonisms I more frequently experience with queer and trans students.

These experiences certainly highlight the emotional complexity of the WGS/LGBT studies classroom. Students come to our classes seeking not only information but also community, validation, and answers to intense identity questions, whether they are fully aware of that or not. I point this out to note that even as we incorporate more material that better addresses the range of students' experiences, there will still be moments of tension in the classroom. I'm often disappointed when I find students' frustrations directed at me, but reminding myself of the structural pressures impinging on their nascent selfhood sometimes helps me shift into a more compassionate mode. Though I'm suggesting that incorporating more trans material may help ease some of the tension trans students bring to WGS classes, I nevertheless want to point out that this contestation around expertise is likely to continue. While most of our students are working through a shifting relationship to authority during our classes, asserting expertise has a unique structural component for trans students whose identity claims are consistently undermined.

Rapidly Changing Terminology

Though students seek validation for what they already know about gender and sexuality, their foundation for such knowledge is usually the Internet, and more specifically, social media. Although these venues can be useful to form a sense of community and mitigate isolation, they also exacerbate the problem of students' ahistorical approach to terms they use. For example, in a recent Intro to LGBT Studies course, some trans students objected to several of the terms and definitions in the introduction to the first edition of Susan Stryker's *Transgender History*. Originally published in 2008, some of the terms were already a bit out of date, and that was on the agenda for discussion for the day. For example, the common use of "they" as a gender-neutral pronoun has only become widely accepted within trans circles in the last three or four years. Prior to that, it was far more common to have to ask people which set of gender-neutral pronouns they preferred—zie/hir, they/them, or something else (*Transgender History* 21–22).[3]

Students' frustrations with texts that are "out of date" after less than ten

years offers a great opportunity to teach about how quickly trans terminology is changing right now and to teach more generally about how identity terms and community vernaculars evolve. Leslie Feinberg's work is a useful starting point for illuminating these shifts. At a time when access to trans surgeries required adherence to a narrative of moving from one discrete gender to *the other* gender, Feinberg re-purposed the term "transgender" as an alternative to being a "man" or a "woman" (Stryker, *Transgender History* 19, 123–24). The short chapter, "We Are All Works in Progress" illuminates the "neither man nor woman" concept Feinberg had in mind, and "Transgender Liberation: A Movement Whose Time Has Come" illustrates the broad coalitional possibilities Feinberg imagined for "transgender." Almost thirty years later, though, "transgender" is often adopted as an identity label by trans people who pursue conventional medical transitions. "Genderqueer" has taken the place of "transgender" over the last several years. Selections from the first issue of *TSQ—Postposttranssexual: Key Concepts for a Twenty-first Century Transgender Studies*—also illuminate these shifts, particularly the entries for "Asterisk," "LGBT," and "Umbrella" (Tompkins; Murib; Singer).

I talk students through this timeline and point out to them that the search for new terms that mean something different than the current usage of a popular term is only going to continue to generate this shift in language. It's part of the evolution of language. But an additional strategy for evolving vocabularies is to defiantly claim an identity label—such as "trans"—in spite of someone else's insistence that you don't measure up to that term. My hope is that they will make space for more robust and interesting conversations about the differences in experience between two or more people who choose the same identity term.

One way to encourage students' curiosity about the meanings people bring to their choices around identity labels would be to offer them several perspectives of people explaining their identity label choices. A discussion thread on the Asexuality Visibility and Education Network (AVEN) website considering the differences between "genderqueer" and "nonbinary" could be a useful classroom discussion tool ("Genderqueer vs Nonbinary"). Several respondents to this discussion board suggest that "nonbinary" is an umbrella term, and several others suggest that "genderqueer" is an umbrella term. Some mention that they were uncomfortable with the connotations of "queer" at first, and others weren't aware "queer" had a political resonance at all. Asking students to interpret and map the conflicting meanings these discussants bring to "genderqueer," "nonbinary," and other identities mentioned would usefully open a discussion about both individual identity development and the transformation of language within social groups. I would be most likely to use this thread for a classroom discussion if students had already opened a discussion about "nonbinary" identities, and it would work best in a class with at least a few mature and thoughtful queer students. Additionally, it would be important to approach this document and lesson with openness and a genuine curiosity about the meanings of these terms rather than frustration with and dismissal of statements made on this discussion board or by students in class.

Attachment to Identity Labels

In addition to the usefulness of a historical perspective for demonstrating the continual evolution of identity labels, I would advocate for classroom opportunities that allow students to see the different perspectives people bring to one term within any particular historical moment. As the AVEN discussion board suggests, there seems to be a proliferation of terms for gender identities and expression happening alongside the proliferation of language to describe one's degree of sexual and romantic desire in asexual online communities. As more students adopt these identity terms in the classroom, it seems to me that students are seeking to condense their experiences of gender and sexuality into a few unfailingly clear descriptors.

Such faith in the ability of language to clear away all confusion, though frustrating in a humanities class, is nevertheless developmentally appropriate for students. The Perry Scheme, a framework I've found illuminating for understanding points of tension in undergraduate learning, suggests that students move through four stages of development in their sense of the source of knowledge (Perry). First, students think that "truth" comes from the textbook and the professor. Next, students believe that "everyone is entitled to their own opinion," where all "facts" are of equal weight. Third, students learn that there are often more than two perspectives on any particular issue, that knowledge is shaped by a variety of contextual factors, and to evaluate the evidence provided for claims. Only a small number of students make it to the third stage before they complete undergraduate work. In the final stage, students integrate their analytic skills into their lives and are able to act on the nuanced analyses they have generated (Kloss 151–52). *Women's Ways of Knowing* expanded on the Perry Scheme, offering additional stages, positing a nonlinear movement through stages, and noting that students of color, white women, and other marginalized students might, by virtue of their lived experiences, be aware of the subjectivity of knowledge much earlier than more privileged students (Belenky et al.).

Many of our students in introductory classes are either in stage one or two. In upper-level classes, we may see a few students in stage three, but there is often still a strong undercurrent of "everyone is entitled to their opinion." This distribution illuminates the cognitive underpinnings of two common WGS classroom issues: a sense that "respecting everyone's identity" means not critiquing the politics of anyone's identity label choices, and the search for precise language to describe one's identity.

In a common manifestation of the second stage—"everyone's entitled to their own opinion"—students believe that a professor's input is simply their "opinion;" they understand grading to be profoundly subjective and based only on professors' personal feelings (Kloss 152). Students with more benevolent or progressive inclinations demonstrate a similar framework when they suggest that all identity labels one might choose are equally valid and that all identity terms are based on self-identification alone. This impulse results in a profoundly minoritizing approach to identity terms (Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* 20). In a 300-level feminist and queer theory course I taught, a student's reflection on another student's definition of "queer" illuminated this. Student one looked across the table at student two and

said, "When you pointed out that 'queer' is a term of self-identification, I realized I'd never thought about it that way and that I shouldn't call people queer if that's not how they identify." Student one seemed to have misinterpreted student two's point that queer is one of those terms that should be used quite cautiously by allies. However, student one—himself queer—had interpreted that as "I shouldn't call someone queer if that's not how they describe themselves."

This inclination becomes the most frustrating for me during discussions of "agender" identity. To be clear, if a student tells me they identify as "agender," I will respect whichever pronouns they prefer. In a line of thinking I keep to myself, though, my feeling is that one can't be without gender in a world that is so relentlessly gendered. I fully support mixing and matching and queering gendered signifiers in any way, but one can't be without gender. The Perry Scheme provides useful guidance for responding to these moments. It is not helpful for us to dismiss students' identities and tell them they are wrong in these moments. Instead, students need opportunities to explore varying interpretations of identity terms and other cultural objects. Accordingly, if it seemed appropriate in the context of the class, I might gently ask a student mentioning agender identity what that means to them. Additionally, I would watch for other opportunities throughout the semester to raise a question about what a world without gender would look like. This question in particular invites a variety of visions and promotes an awareness of the situatedness of knowledge and political imaginaries.

In addition to this minoritizing, respect everyone's identity approach, students seem to be searching for a single, precise word to encapsulate their experience of gender or sexuality. This has been apparent to me in the emergence of "nonbinary" as an alternative to "genderqueer" or "genderfluid." Though students in my classes have identified as "nonbinary," I have been unable to perceive any difference in the meaning, politics, or style of nonbinary versus genderqueer students. As the discussion board cited above attests, there is no settled distinction between nonbinary and genderqueer at this point in time. I can understand that students may not feel like "trans"—with or without an asterisk—is capacious enough to include a genderqueer identity; there are trans people who police the boundaries of trans identity by deriding those who don't want to present normative masculinity or femininity post-transition or otherwise aren't interested in pursuing a conventional medical transition. Students often shorthand this as the "trans enough" discourse. It makes sense to me that genderqueer (mixing, playing with, or otherwise queering binary gender) is different from gender fluid (moving between multiple gender expressions on a regular basis), but it is not clear that "nonbinary" captures something different than the other two. As a result, I have interpreted this proliferation of language as a search for a perfect and precise identity label.

The idea that there might be a single term that perfectly captures one's experience of gender is an effect of the second stage in the Perry Scheme, where students don't yet fully understand the imprecision of language. As they move into the third stage, they begin to understand that there are a range of viable interpretations for most cultural objects. Such an insight can be translated into an awareness that

multiple people who use the same identity term have quite different interpretations about what that term means. To help students move more fully into the third stage of thinking, they need opportunities to learn that classmates interpret assigned readings, cultural objects, political or social events, experiences, and identity terms differently than others (Kloss 153). As they integrate those insights, they will begin to see more fully that language doesn't offer the sort of precision they hope it will.

Fiction and poetry offer especially useful opportunities for students to see a range of interpretations, as was illustrated in a recent classroom discussion of *Stone Butch Blues*. I would not typically choose to teach *Stone Butch Blues* because I'm frustrated with the ways in which both trans men and lesbians claim it as a representation of their lives; Feinberg also describes it as both a lesbian and a transgender novel in the afterword for the 2003 edition (np). However, I think such a framing only encourages people in both those groups to reduce the novel to contemporary understandings of either lesbian identity or FTM identity. More to the point, it's quite difficult to get most groups of students to grasp the nuances of Feinberg's illustration of "transgender" at the time the novel was written.[4]

However, it was on the syllabus for an upper-level class I took over for a colleague, and the students in that class did a great job grappling with the novel's complexities. As students marshaled evidence from the text to determine the meaning of "stone" and whether or not it meant the same thing in the case of "stone butch" and "stone femme," there were several moments in which students realized that they had interpreted a line of dialogue differently than another student. More importantly, as students sought a clearer understanding of the texture of queer life in the '50s and '60s, our discussions of Jess's fights and break-ups with Milli and Theresa provided ample opportunity for students to collectively interpret the sometimes vague evidence in the book about the precise nature of the characters' conflicts (108, 111–13, 147–53). There are a growing number of trans literary works that offer interesting alternatives to *Stone Butch Blues*. For poetry, J. Jennifer Espinoza's *There Should Be Flowers* seems especially teachable, and the collections *Subject to Change: Trans Poetry and Conversation* (ed. Melt) and *Troubling the Line: Transgender Poetry and Poetics* (ed. Tolbert and Peterson) offer a range of voices. Among new novels, my first choice would be jia qing wilson-yang's *Small Beauty*, though Kai Cheng Thom's *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars* is also good and quite popular. *The Collection: Short Fiction from the Transgender Vanguard* (Léger and MacLeod) offers shorter options for fiction.[5]

Additionally, offering students language to think about the relationship between one's gender presentation and how others read one's presentation could also help them understand the variability of interpretation. Suzanne Kessler and Wendy McKenna's "Toward a Theory of Gender," one of my favorite pieces for theorizing transness, is useful on this count. Though it pre-dates the consolidation of trans theory, it remains incredibly useful for understanding contemporary processes of gendering. Studying the process by which people attribute gender to others, they showed participants illustrated figures of various combinations of sex characteristics and then asked them to determine

the figure's gender. Among other findings, they concluded that after participants attributed gender to the figure, "almost anything can be filtered through it and made sense of" (167–68). They also found an androcentric bias in gender attribution, noting that adults disproportionately attributed maleness to figures. The only consistent sign of femaleness was the absence of masculine signifiers (169–71). Accordingly, this chapter highlights a key piece of why it is often easier for trans men to pass than it is for trans women.

I have been surprised in teaching this chapter that trans and trans-aware students haven't heard the term "gender attribution." They are familiar with "gender identity" and "gender expression" but not "gender attribution." This seems to be related to their faith in identity; they don't have language to facilitate the awareness that other people are reading their gender expression in ways that they cannot control. Hopefully the language of "gender attribution" allows them to accept that gender expression is often a compromise; as much as trans students may wish to be recognized as genderqueer or nonbinary, most of the world is familiar only with "man" and "woman," and Kessler and McKenna's article illuminates how easy it is for people to slot everyone—no matter how queer—into the position of either man or woman. You can only be understood as genderqueer or some variation thereof by an audience that has the capacity to read a complex array of gender expressions.

Emotional Literacy

The Perry Scheme provides a useful framework for thinking about the kinds of cognitive blocks students might have in assimilating some of the ideas we would like them to grasp, yet student resistance can be emotional as well as cognitive. Perry did, in fact, note the emotional charge of the work of moving between stages. Students need time to grieve the loss of a familiar world view and with it, the friends and family members who no longer see things in the same way our students do (Kloss 157). Additionally, though, students are also grappling with a complex emotional terrain as they form relationships, come out to family members, and move more fully into adulthood. Accordingly, offering students emotionally complex material is not only useful for students' cognitive growth, it also offers an opportunity to help students work through some of the more difficult sticking points in the transition to adulthood.

In "Teaching with Trauma," Angela Carter offers several helpful ways in which disability studies can illuminate the "trigger warnings debate." What struck me most, however, was her contention that "Appeals for trigger warnings are, in essence, appeals to include instruction and language on emotional literacy within the curriculum" (11). There may be some resistance to this idea among WGS faculty, given that feminism in the academy has often been denigrated as a field fixated on processing feelings rather than offering valuable insights about social formations. Additionally, white women and faculty of color are often asked to do a disproportionate amount of emotional labor for students and may be reluctant to invite more emotional labor within the space of the classroom (Magnet et al. 4). At the same time, though, I think an important component of our work with students has to involve modeling emotional maturity. To that end, I offer a couple of additional

suggestions for trans content that meets these aims, with the caveat that these discussions must be approached with compassion for trans students. I would not recommend these materials for instructors who are ambivalent about trans identities or trans-identified students. Because these materials focus on the perspectives of cis people in relationships with trans people, they must be approached with awareness of and respect for the difficulties trans students may have engaging cis perspectives on transitions.

Sonya Bolus's "Loving Outside Simple Lines" is a short piece written by a femme—she identifies as a "transsensual femme" by the end of the chapter—who describes her process of adjusting to her partner's transition. There are a few cringe-worthy moments in the piece, but it is ultimately a moving and honest discussion of the hurdles faced by someone adjusting to her partner's transition. Furthermore, its happy ending demonstrates that relationships can survive a transition, which may be a message some trans students need to hear. More importantly, though, the piece raises interesting questions about the relationship between a cis partner's sexual identity in relation to a trans person's gender identity. There are some trans people who would not date someone whose sexual identity contradicts their gender identity. For example, some trans men will not date lesbians—even those open to dating trans men—since a "lesbian" by definition is a woman who loves women. However, with a bit more openness to the insufficiency of identity categories to capture the complexity of lived experience, there might be room for seeing that your partner's *identity* doesn't have to validate your gender identity, as long as your partner responds to you respectfully.

When I taught "Loving Outside Simple Lines" in an upper-level sexuality studies class recently, the nonbinary and trans students in the class hated it. They were suspicious of a piece about transness written from the perspective of a cis person. There is some legitimacy in their reactivity on this point; as with any other structure of privilege, cis perspectives on transness are often given precedence over our own interpretations. Reading cis perspectives on trans identities may exacerbate vulnerabilities trans students experience as they struggle to assert the legitimacy of their identities against family members and others who discourage and discredit them. My students' reactions to this piece likely came from a place where they needed to sort out the nuances of their own identities. What they most wanted was affirmation of their identities and the space to find their own voices, which is difficult to do when you are inundated with others' interpretations of your gender and sexuality. However, I think it is also important for them to have the opportunity to consider that one's own identities have an impact on loved ones' identity processes as well. As I mentioned earlier, though, it is crucial that this be done compassionately.

Gwen Haworth's documentary, *She's a Boy I Knew*, is an additional useful resource for considering how transitions fit into romantic and family relationships. Haworth documented her own transition and the responses of her family and friends. Though her family members sometimes say things that are difficult for a trans person to hear, her friends and ex-wife are exceptionally insightful. The film is emotionally complex and nuanced, and multiple moments in the film highlight and mock normative gender socialization. Accordingly, this film is great not only

for discussing many dimensions of trans experience but also for highlighting the role of families in enforcing normative gender. However, when using the film to highlight the social construction of gender, extra care must be taken to emphasize that trans people are not the only ones with socially constructed gender identities, as I described earlier.

Understanding the Power of Regulatory Institutions

On the first day of teaching Stryker's *Transgender History* in Intro to LGBT Studies before starting in on the material I had prepared, I asked students what they wanted to discuss, and one trans student quickly jumped in to say, "Can we talk about how it's not 'Gender Identity Disorder' anymore? It's been changed to 'gender dysphoria.'" That was not one of the terms I'd planned to discuss, since I don't see much meaningful difference between the impact of those two terms.[6]

I responded, "Sure. What difference do you think that makes?"

"Well it's not a disorder anymore," she responded.

"But it's still in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* that psychologists use to diagnose mental disorders."

Other students chimed in to say, "It's not pathologizing just because it's in the *DSM*."

Though I'm glad students are taking a nonpathologizing approach to mental health, I think such faith in the neutrality of diagnostic categories reflects a lack of awareness about how social institutions shape the ways we experience and name our identities. However, trans theory is quite adept at addressing the ways in which identities are shaped by external forces. Early trans theory work focused on the ways in which doctors and psychologists required a particular narrative of trans people seeking surgeries. During this time, trans women (very few trans men were considered in the university-based sex reassignment clinics) were screened for their ability to pass as conventionally attractive heterosexual women post-transition. As one manifestation of this imperative, they were expected to both express a desire to carry a baby and an acknowledgment that that would not be possible after vaginoplasty. Furthermore, several trans theory pieces highlight the tension between strategic deployment of these narratives and internalizing them as the truth of one's identity (Spade, "Mutilating Gender"; Stone; Stryker, "My Words to Victor Frankenstein"; Stryker, *Transgender History* 92–101, 111–20).

Such readings might highlight for some students the ways in which the words and concepts available to us to understand our identities are fundamentally shaped by the language offered by regulatory systems. For example, I've heard several young trans people say, "I'm feeling really dysphoric today," which strikes me as a strange use of the term "dysphoria." When I transitioned in 2005, this was not something I heard people say in the trans community groups I attended. However, this language use seems to be the result of the aforementioned shift in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* from "Gender Identity Disorder" to "gender dysphoria."[7]

These regulatory narratives are not only imposed by doctors, psychologists, and agents of the state. They are also policed within communities. Additional trans studies readings illuminate these interlocking forms of regulation. Jacob Hale's short piece, "Whose Body is this Anyway"

illustrates the interweaving of regulatory agencies and community-based identity policing. He lists multiple perspectives questioning, judging, and policing his decisions about genital surgery, including medical professionals, coworkers, family members, and other trans men. For more advanced classes, Aren Aizura's "Of Borders and Homes" discusses the contours of trans citizenship in Australia. Though he focuses on the ways in which the state demands white, normative masculinity of those seeking trans rights, an anecdote about intracommuity policing of gender expression illuminates the continuities between state and community-based demands for gender normativity (293). Additionally, Sandy Stone's "The Empire Strikes Back" both explains how the medical narrative became common knowledge among trans people and critiques the ways in which many early trans memoirs rehash this narrative.

Faith in State Recognition and Visibility

Finally, as I've noticed increasingly common student self-diagnoses of anxiety and depression—especially among queer students—I've wondered what the cause might be. It could simply be that stigmas around mental health are decreasing enough that students feel more comfortable telling me about these things.[8] It could also be that I'm now teaching more upper-level courses; it seems developmentally appropriate that junior year, for example, might be a particularly potent time for anxieties about identity and career, among other things. But I wonder if another key piece of the puzzle is the peculiarity of this moment in LGBT politics and history.

Even students who are well versed in and committed to queer critiques of marriage and other forms of state recognition are nevertheless still emotionally attached to the hope that legal reforms will or should improve their lives. I think a number of our students might be in a position of feeling—at some level below the intellectualizing level at which they attach to queer critiques of state recognition—that when nondiscrimination statutes prohibit discrimination on the basis of gender identity or sexual orientation, they won't encounter discrimination. I've been surprised on some occasions that students who are exceptionally well informed about the legal protections afforded them and about ongoing areas of concern for trans activism are nevertheless naïve about the limits of legal reforms. They seem unprepared to deal with, for example, bureaucrats who insist—in spite of policies outlining what kinds of documents are needed to change one's sex designation on an identity document—that it's not possible to change a gender marker on an ID.

More specifically, I spoke with a transfeminine WGS major at another college who was seeking professional mentorship as they considered WGS graduate programs. It was clear to me that they understood the critiques I've mentioned. Towards the end of our conversation, though, they asked me what I thought about the Trump administration's recent reversal of the executive order that allowed trans youth to access school bathrooms that correspond with their gender identities (Stolberg). I asked what they thought. They began saying that they were feeling depressed about it because they'd hoped that a victory for trans kids meant we were headed in a more trans-positive direction. Their sentence fizzled out before

they got to the end of it; I think they realized in that moment the hope they'd been hanging on legal reforms.

Though I'm also a little happy and relieved when legal reforms at least symbolically validate the existence of trans people, I'm also suspicious of the extent to which such a "victory" will materialize in our everyday lives. My most prominent feeling in such instances is concern about what kind of backlash such a symbolic gesture might provoke. The current surge in trans visibility seems to have encouraged a broader number of well-intentioned liberals to identify as trans allies, which opens up a broader range of conversations than might have been possible in the past. But more trans visibility also means that a broader range of transphobic people will be more attuned to the presence of trans people. I think things will likely get worse for most trans people before they get better.

In this complicated political moment, trans students in particular (but queer and feminist students as well) may be especially vulnerable to the depression inspired by these LGBT political developments. The more advanced thinkers among them know intellectually that state recognition won't solve their problems, but they haven't integrated that information at a deeper, emotional level of knowing (Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling* 167; Savion). To that end, additional readings about the failures of state recognition and the strictures of state regulation would serve all our students well, further reinforcing the limits of state recognition.

Recent trans theory work offers numerous options for discussing themes of state regulation, though some of these readings can be quite dense (Beauchamp; Currah and Moore; Currah and Mulqueen; Haritaworn et al.; Snorton and Haritaworn). One very teachable option is Clare Sears's "Electric Brilliancy." Discussing late ninteenth-century San Francisco, Sears outlines four interlocking regulatory mechanisms used to police the "problem bodies" of cross-dressers, prostitutes, Chinese immigrants, and disabled people. I typically pair this with *Screaming Queens*, a documentary about the Compton's Cafeteria Riot in San Francisco in 1966. I ask students to identify which of the regulatory mechanisms Sears lists were still in effect toward the end of the twentieth century. Though this pairing doesn't leave as much time as I'd like to discuss the nuances of "Electric Brilliancy," it usefully highlights the continuity of discriminatory policing practices.

Queer (In)justice builds upon themes of state regulation, delving more specifically into a queer and trans critique of the criminalization of LGBT people. This text is very accessible and illuminates the perspective that the legal system is not so much about "justice" and safety but about maintaining white supremacy and gender normativity (Mogul et al. xvi). It emphasizes connections between the police violence that instigated the Stonewall riots and ongoing policing of bars frequented by queers of color. This would pair interestingly with the edited sampling of CeCe McDonald's prison letters, "'Go Beyond Our Natural Selves'" (McDonald and Tinsley). McDonald's letters usefully highlight the connections between interpersonal and state violence, illuminate some of the nuances of queer/trans desire, and critique hegemonic masculinity, and students appreciate her optimistic tone. Her focus on a politics of love would make her letters a great pairing for black feminist work in this vein, as well.[9]

Finally, for more advanced groups of students, Dean Spade's *Normal Life* is an excellent resource. Spade details the administrative violence of gender-segregated facilities and policies that prevent people from obtaining gender-congruent identification documents, illuminating the more subtle mechanisms through which the state enforces gender normativity. In particular, his chapter "What's Wrong With Rights?" speaks to the problem I've identified in this section (38–49). Additionally, he describes several organizations working in the mode of "critical trans politics," demonstrating what alternatives to recognition look like. Most strikingly, examples of prison abolition strategies have generated productive discussions of activist possibilities that many of my students hadn't previously considered (121–27).

Conclusion

I started this article with a concern about the ways in which some WGS professors seem to think that trans students are usurping space from cis women in classes. As I've discussed several potential forms of resistance trans students may present in WGS classes, I've offered suggestions for countering those forms of resistance intellectually with trans studies readings. At the same time, I've also described the emotional experiences trans students may be having outside the classroom that might influence their intellectual resistance.

While swapping out some assigned readings and reconceptualizing the structure of the syllabus are key pieces of teaching trans students and trans studies more effectively, supporting trans students is also centrally about the degree to which we as instructors are willing to recognize the emotional lives of our students and act with kindness (Magnet et al.). Furthermore, the extent to which we project our own feelings about course material or debates in the field onto our students impacts our ability to teach them effectively (Magnet et al. 13, 17; Awkward-Rich). There have been a number of articles circulating on the Internet over the last several years written by WGS faculty on topics such as trigger warnings, Title IX investigations, and the demise of queer culture that flippantly dismiss students as fragile, whiny, and obsessed with a victim identity (Halberstam, "You Are Triggering Me!"; Halberstam, "Triggering Me"; Kipnis; Belmont). I too have had plenty of classroom moments of frustration with students' sensitivity and fragility—some of which I've discussed in this article—but I worry about the tone we take as we work through these frustrations.

Queer and trans students, students of color, and young progressive people of all stripes have ample reason to be concerned in this moment. I wonder if, in the midst of their twenty-year-old lives, they're expressing whatever mixture of anxiety, shame, depression, powerlessness, and fear they're feeling by venting on us, the people who are presumably the sympathetic adults in their lives. They don't yet have the emotional resources to imagine how to begin addressing the enormity of the problems that are stressing them out. *I* don't have the emotional resources to imagine a response to most of the problems of this moment that would feel meaningfully empowering or effective.

In addition to the stress of contemporary politics, the ideas and subjects we teach are emotional. They provoke students' feelings of vulnerability, outrage, and fear. For many of our students,

the ideas they encounter in our classes may give voice to things they've wanted to express for a long time, and that very awakening, empowering though it may be, may simultaneously make them unrecognizable to their families of origin. All of this is a lot to process at twenty, in the midst of what's already a major transition even for the most normative students on our campuses.

Instead of taking our frustration out on students who are desperately seeking some sort of framework or skills for dealing with everything they're feeling, what could we offer them to help them through that process? I'm not going to pretend that I have the saintly patience it requires to always approach students with compassion, especially when they're lashing out at me in a moment of frustration. Nevertheless, I think the central question for feminist pedagogy is not, "What's wrong with these students," but rather "What skills are they seeking the language to ask us for?" After all, they can't learn effectively if most of their attempts to name themselves or express their feelings are met with resistance and dismissal.

Acknowledgments

I'd like to thank Cameron Awkward-Rich for detailed feedback and many conversations that challenged and clarified my thinking in this article. Thank you to Katie Schweighofer, Laura Harrison, and Liam Lair for extensive pedagogy discussions that have sharpened my thinking about classroom dynamics. Finally, thank you to two anonymous reviewers for their generous feedback. Any errors and omissions are my own. This article was completed with the support of the Duke University Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies Program's Postdoctoral Fellowship in Transgender Studies.

NOTES

1. I hesitate to use the language of "cis" or "cisgender" in this article because it is often used in ways that establish a binary opposition between trans and non-trans people and stabilize the meaning of those two categories. However, "cis" has become the conventional way to mark "non-trans" genders, and it seems important to specify that the young women we're concerned about in these classes are cis women. See Enke, "Education of Little Cis" for a more robust critique of "cis."

2. With a growing number of PhDs in gender and women's studies, trans studies' call to focus on the production of gendered subjects has been echoed by others who—even though their research focuses on issues of central relevance to cis women—articulate a focus on "gender as an analytic" rather than on "women," specifically. Such sentiments have been articulated regularly at the National Women's Studies Association Conference over the last three or four years, especially in sessions discussing the experiences of recent PhD recipients who are the first or second full-line hires in WGS departments and programs.

3. A revised and expanded edition of *Transgender History* including an updated terminology section is now available (Stryker, *Transgender History*).

4. Erica Rand's "So Unbelievably Real" discusses some of the complexities of teaching *Stone Butch Blues* from a different angle than I've discussed here.

5. From *The Collection*, Léger's editorial note, Everett Maroon's "Cursed," Casey Plett's "Other Women," Carter Sickels's "Saving," and K. Tait Jarboe's "Greenhorn" seem like promising options.

6. Eric Plemons writes, "[Gender dysphoria] does not pathologize the desire to alter bodily sex characteristics as transsexualism had done, nor does it pathologize identity as the intervening diagnosis of gender identity disorder had done" (102; see also Zucker et al.). I am still suspicious of the claim that gender dysphoria

is not pathologizing, but a more accurate statement to my students might have been, "Regardless of the level of pathologization attached to this term, it still shapes how we experience and talk about our identities."

7. Thank you to Liam Lair for this insight.

8. Thank you to Cass Adair for this insight.

9. For black feminist work on a politics of love, I'm thinking in particular of bell hooks's *All About Love* and Jennifer Nash's "Practicing Love: Black Feminism, Love-Politics, and Post-Intersectionality." adrienne maree brown's *Emergent Strategy* would be a great pairing with McDonald for similar reasons.

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