

Unfolding Trans Epistemologies, Lessons, and Solidarities

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Abstract

This introduction explores how trans epistemologies unfold within and against traditions of gender theories and pedagogies, suggesting that such a process will continue to develop in ways we do not yet understand. Then, the introduction summarizes and discusses the contributions to this special issue.

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When we teach and learn about and through gender subjectivities, we engage what it means to be in the midst of social change, but also what it means to be living in subjectivities in the here and now. The various trans pedagogies so well envisioned and organized by Chase Catalano, T.J. Jourian, and Rachel Wagner, and within this special issue offer innovative, thoughtful, and divergent approaches to teaching and learning about trans selves and communities. Taken as a whole, this collection of trans pedagogues set out both externalized praxes aimed at bringing communities together through differences and internalized reflections through autoethnography that sustain trans subjectivities as processes. Trans communities are not settled, indeed in their best intersectional forms such communities are actively involved in decolonizing, antiracist, antisogynist projects. These are social justice goals that will take considerable time and effort as the long work unfolds. These authors remind us, too, that trans communities and students are present now and even as we work on the long duration of justice, we must also be immediately attentive and responsive. In short, the time of trans praxis moves forward to as yet unknown possibilities but also recognizes the necessity of being in the now.

The projects of trans learning and teaching in higher education emphasize the need for reading, articulation, recognition, ethics, and politics—all of our classes, our committee work, our centers, our departments, and our larger universities are bound together by these critical practices. Strategic insistence on substance, ontology, and presence may seem to clash with the more poststructurally and political emergent project of trans and nonbinary politics, but such strategic essentialism has come, variously, out of queer and decolonizing movements too, as a way to bolster intensity against ongoing denial of existence and rights. As the authors in this special issue discuss, that insistence—whether on existence or politics—happens within institutions and histories that have shaped social relations, rights, and definitions and so our projects begin with and against where we are. Re-reading an engagement with Audre Lorde, as Alexander does, raises for us not only wonderments about what her writing as a gender non-conforming Black lesbian poet means in conversation with trans theories, but also what her insistence on the simultaneity of analysis on race, sexuality, class, and gender meant for her politics in relation to contemporary trans people of color. Alexander's re-reading in conversation, too,

pushes us further into the future to wonder what our own temporally-bound understandings of gendering and re-gendering will mean later as those with whom we teach and learn will learn and interact with new political formations. As we teach and learn, this sense of shifting time always follows us, whether a conversation in class changes how our communities think or changes in policies and insurance coverage changes how more people will be able to live their gender identities through embodied practices.

Re-reading feminisms, too, can resituate our understandings of gendered possibilities. If we return to liberal feminism without understanding its institutional critique has roots in women not having access to property, education, and political participation, we miss that their focus was intent on demanding such access for its possibilities, not because they had a limited understanding of what the political realm could be. In other words, as Brown and Ismail point out, such strategies have to be seen within a critique of inequality, like the radical feminist focus on the need to change men (and not only men, reading Charlotte Bunch would, for instance, make it clear that radical feminism had to address the root causes of all inequalities, global, class, and racial, not only sexism and misogyny). Likewise, an analysis of feminist psychoanalytic theory can help explore the dynamics of power imbalances beyond gender but a focus on gender, at a time when uses of psychoanalytic theories were bolstering gender differences, is potentially quite radical for rethinking what women and men could be. Could those theories now move forward into thinking what gender is beyond the binary? They can and do, in much the same way that women of color feminism can and does also move into fuller consideration of shifting gender conceptions and the need to address violences against men of color, even as it also insists on addressing the experiences and political needs of women of color. That multidimensionality has been present in long histories of theories with which we still engage, but over time, too, we've unfortunately tended to level out theories that came before, not looking at what they were trying to do but looking at how they did not accurately predict what we might be thinking now.

Our own theories, of course, will be insufficient for the next generations even if we hope they are in some way generative. As we might attempt to deploy poststructuralist critiques of gender, our challenges to institutions are also shaped by the structures in which we live and work. Part of the challenge of living and working educational institutions is that we know that our work is defined in and through revision, we know that many of our strategies are not-yet sufficient even if they do represent the best possibilities for resistance as we can think and act now. Sometimes our backward-looking critiques may be our strategies for assuring ourselves that we've done better but those backward glances also remind us that we are shaped through struggles we ourselves have not had to live through. We can imagine cross-temporal solidarities and also know we may not share the same scale of injustices (but it's Oct. 8, 2019 and part of me thinks that optimism will be short-lived).

Francis and Jaksch explore the continuing work of resistance in everyday trans lives in higher education. Joining a growing number of studies on trans students, and also joining those who study the experiences of violence and sexual assault that cisgender women experience on campus, their analysis remind us of the significant effort expended by trans students to just make it through universities. Like similar studies on students of color and international or immigrant students navigating institutional and daily interactions designed to keep them at a remove, the daily expenditures of energy trans students must work against exclusion remind us of the costs of intersecting normativities. Jaekel and Holmes explore a different resistance—

that of faculty resisting trans inclusion. Jaekel and Holmes suggest working against faculty resistance by employing more dialogic, problem solving strategies, pushing for assessment of exclusionary practices, and building their own forms of mitigating those exclusions. Lange pushes us to see, too, that any activity in higher education is implicated in colonialism and other histories of insufficient attention to intersecting forms of injustice. Even if we laud the activism that created such spaces, they are nonetheless complicit in the historical and contemporary exclusions of higher education. No matter what work we do to improve education and higher education, we know our work is incomplete and it occupies stolen ground and stolen labor.

Nicolazzo takes her labor to virtual space, and just to bond for a second, her process reminds me of my own search, years ago, for an avatar, a search that wound up generating images of automobile transmissions (*did you mean transmissions?*) and never-grouchy enough gnomes. Given that so many of the authors in this special issue critique the very foundations of the university, Nicolazzo's return to a version of trans monstrosity refigures the world-changing monster into the finest social justice pedagogue. Self-creation, critical authenticity, and interconnected struggles for justice need to be part of our real and virtual pedagogies, including those focused on ourselves and those created through community. Robles, Kennedy, Dews, and Garvey embark on such a communal autoethnography related to an action project to improve trans lives as part of a class on college students. Their explorations of visibilities and invisibilities provide a textured account of how obstacles can impel trans assertion or indicate the need for safety. Their discussions of kinship and allyship, too, chart the variations in connections to mistakes and distances and to the problematic tokenization of trans students in the class.

What each of these accounts do so well is push at the complications to any approach to teaching and learning with and through trans lives and theories. Trans lessons in higher education need to keep this energetic sense of the complications going. We need to continue to recognize the power in such both/and/and-more claims: insisting on authenticities *and* realizing radical situatedness *and* mitigating complicities as we keep the work of trans theories going.