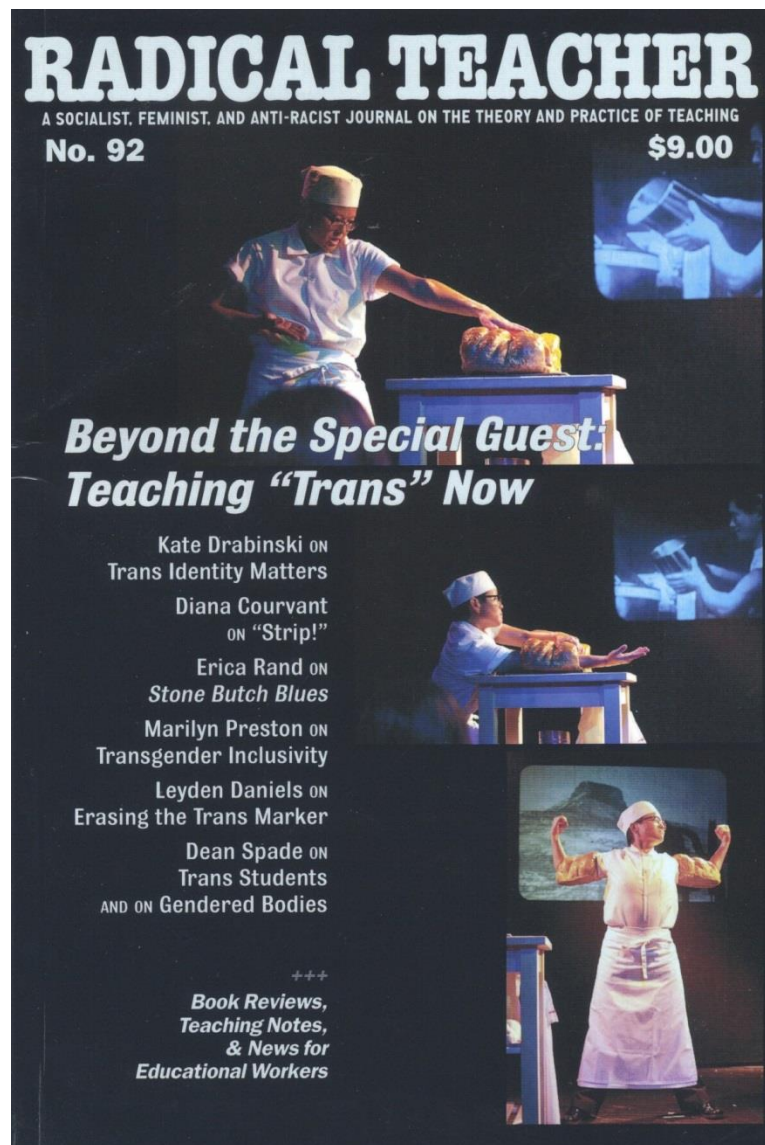


RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Identity Matters: Teaching Transgender in the Women's Studies Classroom

by Kate Drabinski



Teaching transgender studies is often assumed to fall under the purview of gender and women's studies programs and the GLBT studies programs often nested there where claims have been made on the territories of gender and sexuality. The questions that have long plagued these programs persist: Is our subject matter women and men, gays and lesbians, transgender people? Or is it rather the *production* of those categories and how they come to matter? What, exactly, is the object of our study, when that object is so often our own subjectivities and a necessarily moving target? Identities are historical artifacts rather than static realities, so to teach identity-based programs is to risk further calcifying the very categories that operate to oppress those of us who live on the margins of them. At the same time, those categories are necessary to our understanding of very real material histories of oppression and resistance; to teach as if identity is mere figment would render invisible the very real legacies of domination that must be understood if they are to be undone.

Teaching transgender studies in a women's studies curriculum runs up against this old problem that scholars like to imagine we have solved. Transgender issues tend to be taught in the "special guest" model, never central in their own right and always interesting only insofar as they illuminate more clearly "women's" issues. This is evidenced in the literature, awash in tomes that open with anecdotes about individual transgender people and only then widen out, in syllabi that reserve a day for transgender issues, and in classrooms where "transgender" is reduced to a vocabulary word or an example to illuminate some other issue. As a result, transgender studies risks being ghettoized in a women's studies curriculum that is historically hostile to the field, if not the people,¹ and the great potential of teaching and learning from transgender is reduced to a freakish footnote in our students' notebooks to be trotted out at the next party as a crazy example of what they are teaching over in gender studies. Teaching transgender is thus particularly challenging given the lack of complicated public discourse about transgender people, identities, and movements, but this teaching has the potential to open up radical new pathways for thinking about gender, sexuality, and identity more generally. In what follows, I argue that teaching transgender as a set of practices rather than only or always as an extension of identity logics offers an important challenge to the dangerous assumptions most of my students have absorbed through popular discourses about transgender people. This teaching expands the purview of transgender studies beyond the study of individual transgender people to show students how transgender studies in this broader sense can help them think more generally through the social, cultural, and political issues at the heart of women's and gender studies.

In order to accomplish these goals, I center rather than marginalize transgender as a conceptual category in the women's and gender studies classroom, resisting the logic of identity inherent in what this issue of *Radical Teacher* so rightly identifies as the problem of the "special guest." More specifically, I begin my introductory course in gender and women's studies with Susan Stryker's work on

transgender feminism to center transgender as fundamental to understanding gender as practice rather than identity, even as those practices tend to congeal into identities that we experience as natural. I then organize class discussions and activities to get students to see how they too are implicated in social practices of gender, no matter how "natural" gender might feel to them. These exercises risk falling back into the logic of gender as personal identity, so my first written assignment asks students to think about gender and sex without thinking about human bodies at all. This layered approach to the texts we read, the classroom activities we engage, and the assignments we write radicalizes our teaching of not only transgender studies, but women's and gender studies more generally.

Reading Transgender

How we teach is fundamentally tied up with who we teach. Students enroll in introductory gender and women's studies courses for all kinds of reasons: it fits their schedule, it fulfills a university diversity requirement, they want to learn about themselves, it is supposed to be easy or fun, and the list goes on. The introductory classroom is thus a real mix of students, some of whom have deep personal knowledge of the issues raised, others with some general interest but no expectation of being reflected back to themselves, and of course the occasional student who enrolls in order to play "devil's advocate" and fight against the perceived takeover by liberals of their university. (That bait must not be taken, but that is the subject of another article entirely.) This article draws on my experiences teaching at Tulane University, a large private research institution in New Orleans, Louisiana. The Tulane undergraduate population is over 80% white and largely economically privileged, with only 38% of this year's entering freshman class offered any amount of need-based financial aid.² The school has also been in the midst of a massive rebuilding project after the levee breaches of 2005. This rebuilding has taken the form of repairing and upgrading the physical plant, but also recasting Tulane as a school for students interested in civic engagement, pumping significant resources into service learning initiatives and public/private partnerships with K-12 schools in the city. Tulane's Gender and Sexuality Studies program has also undergone significant rebuilding, converting from a Women's Studies program serving a relatively small number of students in a truncated curriculum without dedicated courses in LGBT studies to one serving upwards of 200 students a term in introductory courses alone and a dedicated curricular track in sexuality studies.

That growth has been accompanied by a change in the students enrolling in program courses; increasingly students identify as queer or feminist and expect the course to speak to them. When I began teaching at Tulane in Fall 2007, courses attracted a comparatively narrow student type: white women, many of whom were active participants in the Greek system, few of whom identified, publicly, at least, as GLBT. In my first year I taught only one self-identified male student across six courses. My

Spring 2007 course in queer theory, titled "Sexual Politics" by a somewhat nervous program chair, drew a similar crowd. By the time of my last semester at Tulane, my classrooms were far more diverse in terms of gender identity, sexuality, and race, and I think this was largely a response to syllabi that focused on diverse experiences and course titles that signaled that approach to students, including Narratives of Race and Gender and Advanced Sexuality and Queer Theory as well as the increased visibility of a growing queer faculty. This shift has necessitated a shift in teaching strategy in order to meet the needs of a diverse community of learners, many of whom, frankly, are there only to take a "fun" class. The expectations of students, often tied up in their own sense of personal identity, significantly impact how transgender studies are taught—or rather, learned.

In spite of changing class demographics and the growing reputation of the program, many students are not really sure what they are supposed to learn in a class like mine. When I ask students on the first day of class what they think they are going to learn, I tend to get a lot of blank stares until someone raises her hand and mutters, "women?" Well, sort of, I say, before admitting to them that I have asked them the one and only trick question they will be asked in my class. We are not going to be able to pin down, once and for all, the object we think we are going to study precisely because one of our axioms will be that identities are sociohistorical constructions rather than permanent fixtures. At the same time, our objects of study are remarkably recalcitrant in the academy just as in real life, and regardless of the name of the program, Gender and Sexuality Studies, students and their teachers largely continue to follow the women's studies model. Students who enroll in the course expecting to see their identities reflected answer that first-day-of-class question differently, often with some version of, "I'm a woman/lesbian/gay man and want to learn about myself." I have not yet had a student come out as transgender on the first day of class, though given the way that identity category is becoming increasingly intelligible and available to students—and all of us—and hopefully an integrated part of gender and women's studies curricula, I will not be surprised when that happens; I have taught gender-variant students, but they have largely either not identified as such, or have "come out" in office hours or more private settings. Yet I must assume that my student population includes transgender students along with students struggling with gender identity, sexuality, invisible disabilities, and racial/ethnic identity. When it comes to identity, you really cannot tell by looking.

At the same time, in my experience, very few students are used to thinking about identity in terms of practices. Even if they recognize themselves as occupying an identity category, the practices that produce that identity are not automatically legible to them. For traditional college-aged students reared in educational settings that think about difference largely in terms of tolerance and diversity models, identity is a given, and having oneself recognized for who one *is* remains a primary goal of political identity formation. I struggle as a teacher to break out of these expectations even as I recognize the very different

interests, concerns, and stakes different students bring to the classroom. This first-day-of-school exercise highlights immediately the difficulties of teaching critical approaches to identity in an identity-based program where some students come to learn about themselves, assuming any discussion of their identities will reflect them back to themselves, and others come to learn from life's "special guests"; in both cases, identity logics overdetermine what students are ready to learn.

In order to combat this problem, I turn to Susan Stryker's work in transgender theorizing. In her essay "Transgender Feminism: Queering the Woman Question," Stryker argues that women's studies should embrace the analytic lens offered by transgender theorizing to break from the mimetic model of sex and gender where sex is reified as a biological base from which the social world of gender is built. Transgender feminism, along with other feminisms of difference, potentially helps us break away from that old distinction to challenge "the ways in which bodily difference becomes the basis for socially constructed hierarchies, and helps us see in new ways how we are all inextricably situated, through the inescapable necessity of our own bodies, in terms of race, sex, gender, or ability" (85). Stryker goes on to explain how transgender theorizing can help us understand issues that affect all of us, beyond how gender works to its connection with disability, immigration politics, labor, family organization, criminalization of certain populations, and a whole host of

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other sociopolitical and personal subjects. For Stryker, transgender as a category of analysis potentially offers a way to think about broad connections across areas often kept separate, analytically speaking. Stryker's work calls on women's studies to take seriously its commitments to thinking about difference and embodiment in terms of both specific experiences and universalizing structures. Beginning the course with Stryker's work on transgender feminism builds in a critique of false universalism from the very start, but it also introduces a tension that recurs in our critical-theoretical work as well as in the classroom: what is the connection between personal experience/selfhood and the social structures that delimit even as they enable the personal in the first place? In the case of teaching transgender in the classroom, the tendency of students to start with a focus on identity and identification, as the textbook indeed asks them to do, recapitulates the long-standing struggle to see transgender issues outside of the "special guest" model.

I find Stryker's argument utterly convincing and in line with my own intellectual and political commitments in the classroom. I teach her essay in the first two weeks of my Introduction to Gender and Sexuality Studies course every semester as one of the foundational texts of the course.

And yet invariably students respond to the text as if it is our “special guest,” in spite of its position at the very beginning of the course, rather than on its own argumentative terms. They ask why Stryker waits until the end of the essay to tell the reader that she identifies as transgender. They want to know how genital surgery is done and how common it is, and they make their squeamish faces as I give them the answers they have requested. They use male pronouns to refer to the author or ask me what pronoun to use, in spite of the fact that *Susan* Stryker never brings up the pronoun question in this particular piece. The intellectual currency of the piece is often lost in a sea of probing personal questions exactly of the sort Stryker demands we resist in its challenge to remove *any* particular body as the “ultimate ground for feminist practice” (85).

I used to find this response *only* frustrating, proving that the persistent representation of transgender people as singular freaks had overcome my students’ ability to read an article critically, but after several years of teaching this piece and transgender issues more generally, I have come to see this response as an essential teaching moment. Students respond to these issues in terms of “the special guest” partly because of the way these issues are most often presented to them. Popular culture portrays gender variant people as the special guest quite literally, on talk shows and made-for-TV documentaries on the Discovery Channel, The Learning Channel, and other stations that have professionalized the freak show. This representative tendency carries over to the academic field as well where all too many introductory syllabi continue to follow the pattern of starting with discussions of an assumed category of “woman” and adding differences as the semester wears on. It is our job, as teachers, to respond to this classroom moment in ways that challenge not only the students, but also ourselves, to respond to Stryker’s call to center practices rather than identities, and to unmoor bodies from our naturalized assumptions of difference as difference *from* sex-normativity. I have responded by choosing a textbook and designing class discussions and assignments that frame the course in terms of gender, rather than women, a still-radical move in most programs, even those that have changed from women’s studies to women’s and gender studies, or gender and sexuality studies, an example yet again of how changing a name is not enough to change how we do our work.

I use the textbook *Feminist Frontiers* in my introductory course precisely because it does not replicate the additive identity logics that women’s studies curricula struggle to escape, in spite of decades of criticism and new scholarship. Taylor, Rupp, and Whittier’s textbook opens with the section, “Diversity and Difference,” comprised of articles from Peggy McIntosh’s classic, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” to Paula Gunn Allen’s also-classic, “Where I Come From is Like This.” The many “differences” represented in their first section undo the expected special guest format of the women’s studies syllabus or textbook, centering alterity rather than mimesis as a model for thinking feminism. At the same time, the collection cannot help but reflect, to a certain extent, the special guest model. Part of this is, I think, simply a

problem of identity and grammar. Identity is intersectional, and yet, linguistically, we cannot talk about single aspects without excluding others, at least for the moment that a word takes up a single spot in space and time. As a result, this peppering of “difference and diversity” can give the impression of a tossed salad where we just are not talking about the lettuce yet. The following section, “Theoretical Foundations,” succumbs to this danger in some respects. Although structurally this section comes second, its title indicates that this is where the meat of the course will begin, that this is the “foundation.” The first readings introduce students to gender as an analytical category before complicating gender with other differences. Stryker’s essay, for example, is situated in the midst of a whole array of women’s studies’ “special guests.” The textbook and our teaching practices, in other words, are themselves partly responsible, along with that one *Grey’s Anatomy* episode or *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, for soliciting this response from students.

Talking Transgender

The readings I assign aim explicitly to center alterity as key to thinking about gender, and yet reading alone is not enough to break students from the gender dichotomy that is so natural to so many of us. How do we get students to see beyond this easy dichotomy in a way they can get in their guts? I organize my class discussions to get students to *feel* gender. I begin by asking students to tell me how they know if someone is male or female. The answers are usually slow in coming, as students seem to think it is a rather silly question. We all know what makes a boy a boy and a girl a girl, or so they think, and the first answers are usually related to body parts: breasts, vaginas, penises, and the occasional Adam’s apple. I point out that we are not usually privy to the privates of our acquaintances, and yet we still think we always know. I point out that gender is also in our names (I review enrollments before each semester, and I am usually fairly certain how many men versus how many women I will have in class), how we sit in seats in public (I model this by sitting “like a girl,” legs crossed, upright, and then “like a boy,” splayed out, taking up a lot of space), what happens to our voices when we give answers in class (women students often have that questioning lilt at the end of each statement), and the list goes on: what we wear, the bags we carry, what razors we use and where on our bodies we use them, what kind of car we drive, what movies we are supposed to want to watch, the games we play—and watch—in our free time, and on and on and on.

My goal with this opening exercise is to get students to see that gender is not only more than what we assume to be “real” biological sex, but that it is all-pervasive, shaping our experiences of ourselves down to our very bodily comportment, each other in our relationships, and the social and political world. I make this point by showing my students the difference in how women and men tend to sit on public transportation, an example most students can relate to. I sit upright with my arms pulled in and my legs crossed tight, and then I make that gendered switch, slumping down, opening my legs, *taking up space*. I am

just sitting here, but in my sitting, I am *doing* gender. This exercise always gets a laugh because the difference is immediately recognizable, though for most students, it is not something they have articulated before. I ask students if they fully identify with everything on one or the other list of male/female attributes, and invariably they do not. They look around the room and see women slumped down and spread out, women with short hair, men with purses at their feet, and they see in a real way that when it comes to gender, everybody is doing it, but nobody is doing it exactly "right." I want students to see immediately that for all of us, there is a gap between gender ideals and the realities of our lived experiences. This sets the students up to better understand Stryker's claims in their next reading that rather than thinking in terms of transgender *people*, we would do well to think in terms of transgender phenomena as practices and acts rather than identities. Stryker defines transgender phenomena as any practice or act that steps outside the boundaries of gender normativity as against an understanding of transgender as a contemporary practice of identity. Stryker's theoretical intervention widens not only the scope of transgender issues, but also the category of gender; as she writes, "transgender makes the category of woman more interesting" (83). Such various acts as women wearing bloomers and riding bicycles to playing sports to men wearing makeup and dancing freely can all be considered part of the transgender spectrum. I teach students to think about transgender issues in these terms precisely to move away from the "special guest" paradigm and to center transgender issues, experiences, and history in a discussion of gender that is both deeply personal and entirely structural.

I next focus my students on gender not as an attribute of identity—though it certainly is that—but as a structural category that can be removed from the human body altogether and that moves through social life as a tool of normativity.

Although this approach helps center rather than marginalize transgender issues, it risks reaffirming gender as a natural category of identity that is open to free choice; I can *choose* to wear a skirt or pants, and it is this choice that determines whether or not I am subject to violent gender discipline or not. Students regularly make choices about whether to shave or not, to dress up or not, to wear makeup or not, and I do not want to level out those experiences with the experiences of transpeople for whom choice simply does not have the same meaning. In order to do this, I next focus my students on gender not as an attribute of identity—though it certainly is that—but as a structural category that can be removed from the human body altogether and moves through social life as a tool of normativity. For most students, this is a terrifically radical move. For them, as, I would argue, for most people, gender is something taken for granted as a natural part of

the self. It is one of the first things we notice about people we meet, but we hardly ever notice that we are noticing it until we are forced to by either our own experience of an incongruity between the gender we are told we are, and how we think about ourselves, or by meeting someone whose gender is not immediately sussed out by looking. Part of being intelligible to ourselves and others is to be intelligible in terms of gender, and as a result, gender has become completely and utterly naturalized; that does not mean, however, that gender is *natural*.

Writing Transgender

In order to break up this naturalized understanding of gender, I ask my students to see gender as a mobile category that does not come prepackaged in human bodies. My first written assignment builds on this approach to teaching gender by asking students to see gender as not simply a personal attribute of free choice, but as a category of existence that must be continuously reaffirmed if it is to make sense and do the work of organizing our social lives as it does. In the essay assignment, "Gendered Objects," I ask students to write a critical analysis of how an object socially constructs gender. In other words, how does an object tell us the story of normal gender? As Jeanne Kilbourne powerfully points out in her *Killing Us Softly* series, advertisers are not simply selling us their products; they are simultaneously selling us values, identities, morals, and, most fundamentally, *what it means to be normal*. Once students have their eyes opened to the ubiquitous and essential nature of gender, they see it everywhere, and this assignment helps them put that into words. Students will write about fairly obvious examples, comparing and contrasting, for example, Secret deodorant with Old Spice, or Dove products with those from Dove's brother company, Axe. These kinds of objects are coded in relentlessly dichotomous ways, meeting the grossest gender norms out there. Other students dig a bit deeper and discover gender in such surprising places where gender seems irrelevant, such as drawer hardware, travel websites, and trash bags. It turns out, they discover, that gender is everywhere, and as such, it is not just a property that inheres in their cells from the moment of birth, either pink or blue, but an analytical and ideological category that is much more complicated than whether or not you wear a skirt.

Students also learn, through discussion with peers about their different projects, that the very same gendered images and practices can mean different things to different readers. Building on discussions of standpoint theory, this aspect of the project helps students see through discussion that the way we each "see" is shaped by where we stand. For example, where some students might argue that beer is for dudes, flavored martinis are for girls, and straight whiskey or bourbon is for men, other students challenge those assumptions in class discussion from communities not wedded to such heteronormative understandings of gender. As a self-identified lesbian student once argued in class, a woman ordering a Jack on the rocks at a dyke bar is doing gender in a very different way than a frat guy ordering the same drink at a college bar. Diet products like

Lean Cuisine and Diet Coke have also shown students how what might read as “girly” in one sexed and gendered community reads differently in some queer contexts where staying thin is an essential part of embodying some gay masculinities. The introduction of Coke Zero, a masculinized version of Diet Coke, has added another wrinkle to these readings as companies recognize the ever-shifting complex terrain of social gender in order to sell us more stuff in more ways.

Classroom arguments about the gendered nature of ads often emerge when students bring up some of the most obviously misogynistic advertising campaigns. Nary a semester goes by without a student bringing up the cadre of advertisements from Axe. This company’s body care products are aggressively marketed to young men by arguing that “the Axe effect” will result in users of the product getting mobbed by conventionally pretty, skinny, slutty girls. Many students write papers about their different ad campaigns, decrying the obvious misogyny embedded in Axe’s representational strategies. I complicate this easy reading by asking them to consider the role of humor. The representations are so outrageous and perhaps meant to elicit laughs about these silly notions of heterosexualized masculinity; does that change our reading? Who is the assumed audience, and who is actually the market for this stuff? Students have told me over the years that the real market for Axe is junior high school boys, and the classroom has reverberated with laughter over the idea of the smell of Axe wafting through middle-school hallways as boys aim for an older and more virile

masculinity in a setting where that stuff is most up for grabs. Other students find the ad campaigns so unremittingly sexist that any humor is lost, just part of the cover for telling old stories about women as hapless sluts, almost animalistic in their response to the Virile Male. Still others argue that from their perspective, the ads are really about marketing men to men, in spite of the presence of women; it is the men’s sexuality that is really on display. I share with them my own experience of purchasing the Axe body wash and “detailler” (the very gendered name of their loofah). Nothing about the marketing campaign suggests this is a product for me, so one might argue that my purchase and use of it is an example of transgender phenomena. On the other hand, others might argue that I am simply buying into and supporting negative portrayals

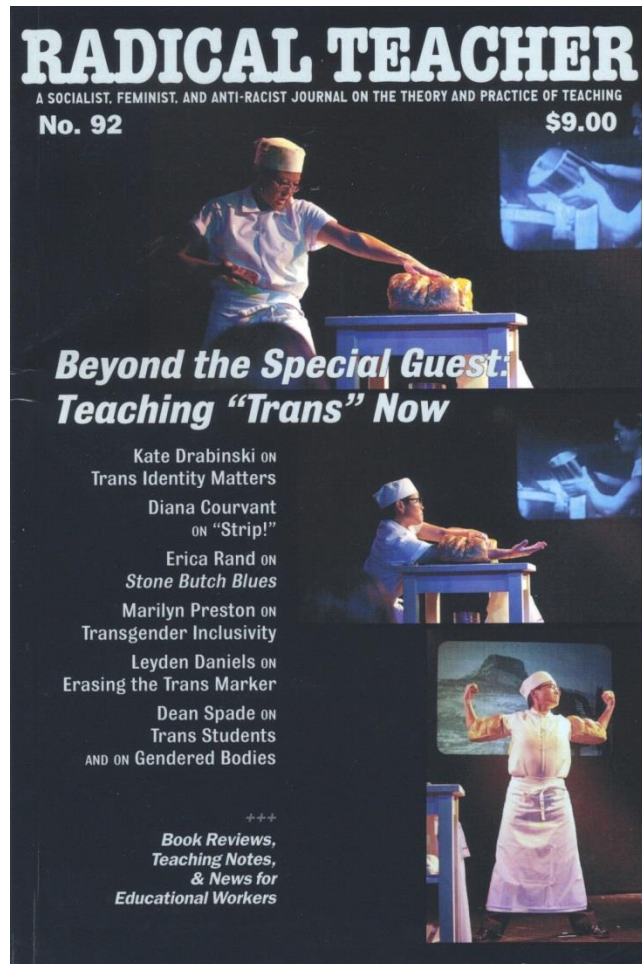
of women. Or perhaps it is an example of doing gender as a butch lesbian. Again, one’s interpretation of images and the way gender and sexuality work through them is dependent on one’s standpoint. The assignment allows students to share their different interpretations based on their own situatedness, driving home the point that gender is more and bigger than any individual interpretation. This kind of classroom interaction is only possible in a diverse classroom, diverse in terms of gender, race, sexual orientation, class, and, if at all possible, age.

The results of this first assignment often show me how difficult it is as teachers to get students to really get, in their guts, the ways in which gender is a lot more complicated than the dichotomies they are sold and use to

think through their own sense of gender identity. Part of the difficulty is the persistent ways popular representational practices reduce gender to its basest stereotypes. To someone unfamiliar with our culture who only consumed television or visited our drugstores, men and women would appear to be two radically different species, and everyone would have to be one or the other in order to figure out what and how to shave (legs or face, Venus or Mach 3 Turbo), what to eat (Lean Cuisine or Hungry Man meals), and more. Of course, none of us live our lives by blithely following gender orders from Madison Avenue. I ask my students to consider what assumptions would be made about someone buying or using the object who did not occupy the gender status assumed by the object itself. First responses are usually aimed at what they expect I want to hear as a gender studies professor: that a man shaving with a Venus razor

will be called a faggot while a woman buying a Hungry Man will be called a fat dyke. This is of course not the case at all, even if men eating yogurt appears to put one at real risk of being called a pussy, according to a recent campaign from Yoplait. In reality, gender norms are much more complicated than this, and that is part of Stryker’s point, I think. If we think in terms of teaching transgender phenomena rather than teaching transgender people, we can radicalize our understanding of gender and, as a result, bring transgender studies out of the shadows of women’s studies.

One of the risks of this approach, however, is to vacate the category of transgender of its specificity as an historical identity category.³ In other words, we are not all



transgender, and to claim otherwise would make it difficult to talk about the specific issues facing transgender people and risk abandoning the potential intersectional connections that transgender issues can articulate. As Stryker argues, being transgender, theorizing from the standpoint of transgender subjectivity, means being able to articulate wide-ranging issues due to the position of her body at the intersections of gender, modes of embodiment, and the technologies of power that work at the level of the body in the service of other social and political practices. Stryker summarizes like this: "Let me recapitulate what I can personally articulate through transgender: misogyny, homophobia, racism, looksism, disability, medical colonization, coercive psychiatrization, undocumented labor, border control, state surveillance, population profiling, the prison-industrial complex, employment discrimination, lack of health care, denial of access to social services, and violent hate crimes" (87). She can articulate these things precisely because, in her words, her "bodily being lives in the space where these issues intersect" (87). Teaching transgender must attend to the specificities of a certain identity-based reality while also remaining open as an analytical concept.

This is the double-edged sword of teaching transgender like this: either transgender is everywhere, or it is nowhere. As a teacher, I find myself stuck between wanting students—including trans and gender-variant students—to find points of entry, which often take the form of identification, and wanting students to learn without meeting the narcissistic demand that they always be able to relate to what we are learning. I deal with this problem by using the transgender framework to discuss other issues in the course, ones that do not on the face of things appear to be transgender issues. For example, where the textbook groups articles around the theme of Violence Against Women, I recall Stryker's article and reframe the issue as *gendered* and *sexual* violence, related to policing proper masculinity and femininity as well as heterosexuality. Stryker's sense of transgender as an articulating category reframes this classic feminist debate in very useful ways that neither refuse the specificities of violence against transgender people nor the analytical utility of thinking about transgender as a description of practices that exceed the framework of identity. The gendered object assignment is one I return to as an example throughout the semester to keep the focus on gender as a practice that both is and

is not of the body, and of identity. In combination with the reading assignments and class discussion, this approach retains the radical potentiality of transgender that is lost when it congeals into an identity category while also showing the ways in which identity categories themselves are historical processes, shifting and changing, no matter how dear our identities are to ourselves.

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Notes

- 1 For an excellent review of historical and contemporary intersections of women's studies and transgender studies, see Talia Bettcher and Ann Garry's introductory essay to Hypatia's special issue on what they call the "interaction" between feminism and transgender studies, titled "Transgender Studies and Feminism: Theory, Politics, and Gendered Realities." *Hypatia* vol. 24, no. 3 (Summer, 2009).
- 2 "College Search Tulane." College Board. N.p., n.d. Web. 22 Aug 2011. <<http://collegesearch.collegeboard.com/search/CollegeDetail.jsp?collegeId=2291&profileId=2>>.
- 3 See David Valentine, *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007.



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