

Unscripting Curriculum: Toward a Critical Trans Pedagogy

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In this essay, Harper B. Keenan draws on his own experience as a white queer and trans educator to consider the meaning of a critical trans pedagogy. Amid dissonant narratives of equal rights and subjection, he explores how his classroom teaching is shaped by his own experience of gender conditioning as well as by the contemporary political climate surrounding trans identity. Keenan argues that a critical trans pedagogy requires unscripting and must necessarily support children in constructing new knowledge.

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What are the words you do not yet have? What do you need to say? What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own, until you will sicken and die of them, still in silence?

Audre Lorde

It is a peculiar time to be queer in the United States. In recent years, mainstream news sources have reported major civil rights victories for LGBT people: we can get married, select a gay-friendly employer from the Human Rights Campaign's Corporate Equality Index, and march in pride parades alongside prominent government officials. Trans people are the focus of television series like *Transparent* and *I Am Cait*, and President Obama became the first US president to say the word *transgender* during a State of the Union address.¹ By these accounts, it would seem that we have finally overcome transphobic oppression. It would seem that our stories are being told and accepted, that transgender identities are being recognized by those in power. It would seem that we are men and women who can get married, get good jobs, and pay taxes—just like everyone else.

Yet, for many queer and trans people, our lives tell us something different: our identities and lived experiences are far more complex and fluid than

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the dominant “just like everyone else” narrative of LGBT identity. When our queerness or transness is recognizable to others, we regularly face discrimination, harassment, violence, and inadequate or even harmful medical services. In part, this is because we are *not* just like everyone else: we have bodies, identities, and relationships that are still rendered invisible by the nation-state (Spade, 2008). Any public display of queerness or transness, from hand-holding to a hairstyle, can make us hypervisible and put us at risk. This simultaneous institutional invisibility and social hypervisibility have grave consequences for our daily lives.

This duality became horrifyingly clear in the June 2016 shooting at Pulse, a queer nightclub in Orlando, Florida, which resulted in forty-nine people dead and fifty-three wounded. Pulse was a place where queer and trans people of color could revel in their visibility; but, in this case, the visibility of their queerness and transness made them a target for one of the deadliest mass shootings in US history. And there are other stories that similarly reveal the fatal consequences of institutional invisibility, like that of fourteen-year-old Kyler Prescott, a transgender boy in San Diego who killed himself after receiving grossly inadequate treatment at a mental health-care facility where employees failed to respect his gender. Kyler’s mother, who was supportive of his transition, took him to the facility to help him emerge from suicidal ideation connected to mistreatment based on gender. “Really, where he had the most problems was with adults not understanding,” she said (Bever, 2016a, para. 31).

I am a white queer and trans elementary school educator. After several years of teaching children in schools in Brooklyn, New York, I now work in elementary teacher education. In this era of dissonant narratives of equal rights and violence, I am called to the work of supporting young children in making sense of the world around them. Students bring their experiences into the classroom, and I do the same in developing my pedagogy. Perhaps for most of us, the classroom door operates as a screen that filters out the complexity of who we are and the communities from which we emerge. In this essay, I offer some of my own experience with this process and consider how educators might examine and work against that filtration of our humanity. I explore the question that continues to echo in my mind—*What does it mean to build a critical trans pedagogy from a queer and trans life?*

I must begin by saying that I do not have adequate language to answer this question. There is no universal queer or trans experience or language. Despite the cemented nature of words on a page, these words defy static meaning. For me, *queer* and *trans* refer to the limitless possibilities of bodily expression and stand in opposition to notions of finite sexual orientation categories or binary gender. It is impossible for me to separate these two terms, as my own transness and queerness have been shaped by living in queer communities made up of people who do not necessarily identify as trans but who challenge dominant paradigms of identity categorization. In other words, queerness has formed my transness, just as transness has formed my queerness.

Of course, this is not how all people who live outside the binary relate to these terms. For some, *queer* and *transgender* are themselves categorical cages and might not even belong together. For others, these are academic terms deployed from ivory towers that have colonized language historically used to make sense of the multiplicity of gender identities among Indigenous communities and people of color (binaohan, 2014). Undoubtedly, and likely precisely because of the conflict over them, these words will come to mean something quite different in ten to twenty years given the rapidly changing landscape of developing language for how we understand and talk about our bodies. I am excited about that process.

As I attempt to consider what a critical trans pedagogy might look like in my own work as an elementary educator, I acknowledge that this consideration is only made possible by generations of ancestors who have built trans pedagogies inside and outside of formal classrooms. Trans people from all walks of life, most whose names I will never know, have been teaching the world about who we are and about the meaning of our bodies for time immemorial. I am deeply indebted to them. Though I hope this fact would be obvious (unfortunately, experience has taught me otherwise), I cannot speak directly to any transgender experience but my own. I offer *my* perspective as a transgender educator to the projects of teaching young children and ensuring trans survival. I am reminded of Adrienne Rich's (1971) poetry: "This is the oppressor's language / yet I need it to talk to you."

Our present situation is that most classrooms in the United States make little room for adults to engage in thoughtful dialogue with children about the meaning of their bodies in the world. Schooling currently functions to categorize children's bodies in all sorts of ways from the moment they are enrolled in preschool. Words like *smart, delayed, big, small, well behaved, defiant, gifted, disabled, fat, thin, quiet, active, black, brown, Latino, Asian, Arab, white, English learner*, and infinite other terms (produced almost daily) are used to sort out who is "normal" and who is "different." I know about this sorting process because it has been performed on my body for my entire life.

The most obvious linguistic anchors of the gender sorting process in school are *boy, girl, man, woman, he, and she*. Although Dick and Jane books and the practice of walking children down hallways in parallel boys' and girls' lines have faded from view in most US schools, children continue to be taught that being a girl means one set of behaviors and roles associated with growing up into a woman (e.g., playing with other girls, being sexually attracted to boys, caretaking, expressing emotion, wearing dresses) and being a boy means another, quite different set of behaviors and roles associated with growing up into a man (e.g., playing with other boys, being sexually attracted to girls, being physically active and aggressive, never wearing dresses). All of this works together to teach children a script about which kinds of genders and bodies are normal and which are not.

Schooling plays an essential role in establishing what Judith Butler (1990) has called the “heterosexual matrix,” the social regulation of “cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalized” (p. 150). Although the nature of cultural intelligibility of *woman* and *man* has changed over time, the categories themselves continue to be preserved, prescribed, and projected onto our bodies from their very conception in the minds of our families, as parents imagine who their child might grow up to be.² Such categorization narrates even our first moments of life, in declarations of “It’s a girl!” or “It’s a boy!” This preservation, prescription, and projection of normative binary gender continues throughout our schooling. I have experienced the reality of this phenomenon both as a student and as an educator. As a transgender person in these roles, I have been an outsider to the normative system of gender—sometimes visibly and sometimes invisibly.

Learning the Script: Transgender Childhood

When I was a child, I watched as everyone around me tried to make sense of my body. Growing up in a conservative, rural town, *transgender* did not become a part of my lexicon until I was in college. I was a gender bender from an early age, but my way of expressing myself was not anything that my family or I described as “trans” at the time. My mostly supportive parents allowed me to cut my hair short when I was three, which came after seemingly endless nightly battles over hair brushing. I was an active kid and was not interested in slowing down to brush my long hair. I wore T-shirts and jeans to school most days so that I could run around and hang upside-down on the monkey bars without anyone making fun of me, like they might have if I were wearing a skirt. I also loved to play dress-up, sometimes layering several beaded necklaces over plastic knight’s armor and topping it off with a bejeweled crown. Dolls *and* blocks were my favorite toys. All of this made perfect sense to me.

But at school, I learned that my way of being in the world did not make sense to other people. On the class roster I was listed as female, which seemed to mean to everyone else that I was supposed to look different than I did. When I was put in situations with new kids, I was often asked, “Are you a boy or a girl?” To me, that question was both embarrassing and exciting. On one hand, the confusion behind the question acknowledged my experience: my way of expressing myself challenged a system that just didn’t make a whole lot of sense to me. On the other hand, the question exposed me as a traitor to an implicit code of conduct that seemed to be very important to everyone else, and I knew that was a dangerous place to be.

When I was in the third grade, my school put on a holiday concert for the students’ families. My teacher told us that we should dress up in red and black and do our hair nice for our folks. On the day of the concert, I wore a red turtleneck and black corduroy pants, which I thought seemed just fine. When

I arrived at school, though, the other kids frowned at my choice of clothing. They asked why I didn't wear a dress or a skirt. I didn't understand. How was I supposed to know? The teacher never said anything about a skirt!

Before the concert began, many of the boys went to the bathroom to comb their hair, slicking their white-boy bowl cuts back with water. When they emerged one by one—looking more like Elvis than Jonathan Taylor Thomas—I figured I ought to follow suit. My hair was short like theirs, after all, and I, too, wanted to look nice for my folks. In the bathroom I gingerly stuck my head in the sink and turned on the water faucet, soaking my hair. I patted it dry with paper towels and then carefully combed it back with my fingers until I looked just like Uncle Jesse from *Full House* (my favorite TV show at the time).

I felt handsome and cool and proud—until I returned to the classroom and saw the look on my teacher's face. Aghast, she yelled, "Good Lord, what have you done? You look ridiculous! If you were my daughter, I swear I would tan your hide. It's bad enough you didn't wear a dress." The other kids laughed and pointed their fingers as she grabbed me by my shirt and led me back into the bathroom, where she shoved my head under the automatic hand dryer, combing my hair down to the sides where, to her, it rightly belonged. I turned red and fought back tears. I was embarrassed and ashamed. I never meant to do anything wrong. When she was done, she grabbed my shoulders and turned me to face her. She looked me up and down and said, "There. Now you look like a pretty girl for mommy and daddy. I swear!"

I share this story because it represents just one small piece of embodied knowledge that informs the way I teach. This exchange was one of countless moments (many of them far more severe) with my peers and teachers throughout my experience of schooling during which I was taught to be ashamed of expressing myself as I wanted to. Over and over, from verbal bullying to recommendations of religious reparative therapy to multiple forms of assault, I learned that defying the expectations of masculinity and femininity that other people had for me presented physical and emotional risks that threatened my survival. In classrooms I was *taught* to hate my genderqueerness. I was *taught* to hate myself.

Breaking the Script: The Terms and Conditions of Trans Survival

More than twenty years later, my trans body moves against a different backdrop. These days it seems like everyone is talking about trans identity. *Time* magazine's 2014 cover story featuring Laverne Cox declared that, in the United States, we have reached a "transgender tipping point" (Steinmetz, 2014). Indeed, today the word *transgender* is all over the mainstream media, from the public voyeurism of Caitlyn Jenner's transition (Bissinger, 2015) to debates about whether medical procedures associated with gender transition should be covered by health insurance (Allen, 2017; Russell, 2017)

The bodies of trans people in schools are at the center of much of this media and debate. Cities like New York and San Francisco are working to develop trans-affirming school policies, while states like Tennessee and South Dakota are attempting to ban trans youth from using bathrooms that align with their gender identities (Berman & Balingit, 2016). LGBT and gender-focused nonprofit organizations are building curricula to teach teachers and young people about how to understand and respect trans identity. In the spring of 2017, there was frenzied public debate over the Supreme Court's review of the case of *Gavin Grimm v. Gloucester County School Board*. The case, which was vacated, would have determined whether public schools could be required to allow transgender students to use the bathroom that aligns with their gender identity (Barnes & Balingit, 2016). And in November 2016, the United States elected a presidential administration that includes a vice president who believes in federally funding conversion therapy for gay and transgender people (Stack, 2016) and a chief strategist who is the former chairman of a news site that regularly features articles ridiculing transgender people and depicting them as mentally ill (Victor & Stack, 2016).

Recalling my own interaction with my third-grade teacher, I'm not sure my experiences would have been made better or worse by all this public attention focused on issues of gender identity. While the media and politicians engage in cacophonous debates that frame the bodies of trans children as controversial, most of those children face severe ramifications of transphobia in their lives. The 2015 *US Trans Survey* indicated that 77 percent of trans people reported some form of gender-related mistreatment during their K–12 school experience.³ Out of nearly thirty thousand respondents, 24 percent reported some physical attack and 10 percent a sexual assault at school. Further, 40 percent of trans people reported having attempted suicide at some point in their lifetime (James et al., 2016). My own trans body stands among many of these statistics.

I came to describe myself as transgender in the years just before trans identity became a hot topic in national media. I transitioned during college, and my identity as a queer and trans activist was well known in the campus community. Although I am now consistently read as a man, my internal sense of self is still rooted in the undefinable abyss that lies beyond the gender binary. I struggle to love that part of me and to present myself authentically to a world that is hostile toward it.

And yet here I am. I survived. For me, a white kid in a town that was 97 percent white and where white supremacist organizations were very much alive and active, my body became endangered primarily by its gender transgressions. Though that danger was very real, I am still here to tell the story of my struggle largely because of my whiteness, the increasing legibility of my masculinity over time, and the fading cues of my femininity. Most of the time I walk through the world interpreted as a straight, relatively masculine, cisgender white guy. Standing at the intersection of those three categories means that

people respond to me quite differently than they did in the past. I no longer seem to fit the image of what most cisgender people think trans people look like. People react with surprise when I share my gender and history, and I hear things like, “Wow, I never would have known you were trans!” These comments, which I find quite troubling, hold layered meaning for me. They reveal how novel and strange the idea of trans identity is to the mainstream public, and they position my body as a spectacle for the consumption of non-trans people.

More chillingly, the assumption that I am a cisgender man also translates to the disturbing internal reality that I have come to look increasingly like the people who commit the most horrific violence against trans people. In 2015, the homicide rate for transgender people reached a record high. Nearly all the victims were transgender women of color, and all their murderers were cisgender men (Stafford, 2015). Because I am commonly read as a straight white man, I live in a trans body that is granted permission to live. I am at low risk of experiencing the police violence and street harassment that many feminine people of color face. Instead, my body has been granted access to teaching young children, completing a doctoral program at an elite university, and, currently, educating future teachers. And yet, in the sometimes-unpredictable moments when my body becomes visibly trans—in the legal or health-care systems, in the locker room, at the swimming pool—I am still at some risk of harm, humiliation, and violence. This is the tightrope of white patriarchy.

Simply confessing my privilege relative to other trans people does nothing to change the material conditions associated with living in a society that is structured to make our bodies impossible (Spade, 2008). Change comes from organizing people and communities. Grace Lee Boggs, whose revolutionary activism in Detroit spanned seven decades, urged a model of “transformational organizing” focused on building skills with the people around us to solve problems as they manifest in our local neighborhoods, rather than top-down systemic change (Boggs & Kurashige, 2012). I have positioned myself in classrooms to do that work because I believe, as bell hooks (1994) writes, that “the classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility” (p. 207).

Honesty and Complexity in Critical Trans Pedagogy

The school classroom is not an easy place for me to be. When, ten years ago, I graduated from college and became a teacher at a public school, I found myself back in the site of much of my own trauma. I found that schooling is still a site of sorting and conditioning bodies into a system of binary gender, a system steeped in hegemonic whiteness for both its teachers and its students. Although my history provides me with a personal understanding of the harm that can be done to children in school and the broader societal danger of forced gender sorting and conditioning, it did not, on its own, teach me

how to actively resist the re-creation of that harm. Today, my teaching practice draws from the progressive pedagogy I learned in my teacher education at Bank Street College. It is informed by my ongoing studies of history, art, and literature and my engagement with community organizing projects. Here I offer examples of how I have sought to fuse my own embodied history with my studies of pedagogy to create my own version of a critical trans pedagogy and identify a few themes I use to guide my practice as an educator.

Teaching with Honesty and Authenticity

A few years ago, when I was teaching the fourth grade, I had a student named Dylan, who, for years, had occasionally worn dresses to school.⁴ This seemed to stop when he arrived in my classroom, however. Dylan was a white kid from a queer, mixed-race family. His parents, who had been supportive of Dylan's choice to wear dresses, approached me in September to let me know that he no longer wanted to wear them to school. He was afraid of what people would think. They wondered if it might have something to do with the fact that I was the first male teacher he had ever had. Admittedly, this stopped me in my tracks. In this instance, the invisibility of my queer gender meant a potential missed opportunity to support my student's own queering of gender.

Several weeks later, Dylan showed up to school wearing a set of sparkly silver bangle bracelets. When he walked in, he hung his head, bit his lower lip, and self-consciously covered the bracelets with his opposite hand. As he unpacked his backpack, I went over to check his homework, just as I did every morning. "Hey Dylan, I noticed you're wearing some bracelets today," I said, "They're so sparkly! Could I try one on?" Dylan grinned and shook one of the bangles from his wrist. I put it on, held it up, and looked at it admiringly. Loudly enough that the other students (many of whom were staring over at us) could hear, I remarked, "It's beautiful."

Although my response was quite intentional, my appreciation of Dylan's choice of accessories was not a contrived performance. For me, slipping that jewelry on my wrist was a way of finding connection not only with Dylan but also with my own femininity, which is often rendered invisible now that most people see me as a man. Dylan's resistance to the gender binary allowed me to bring my own queerness into the classroom. Through a kind of unscripted play, our genders became culturally intelligible, at least to each other, at least for a moment. Saying, "It's beautiful" was less about the bracelet and more about the beauty of following Dylan's lead to allow both of us to bring more of ourselves and our own agency into the sometimes-suffocating space of the classroom.

Schools were not designed to support queer and trans people who defy imposed identity categorization. Schools were designed to sort people by gender through record keeping, facilities (like bathrooms), and activities (like sports). This is not a problem unique to schools. It is a reflection of a society that was not designed to support queer and trans people. The currently

The Genderbread Person v3.2 by its pronounced METROsexual.com

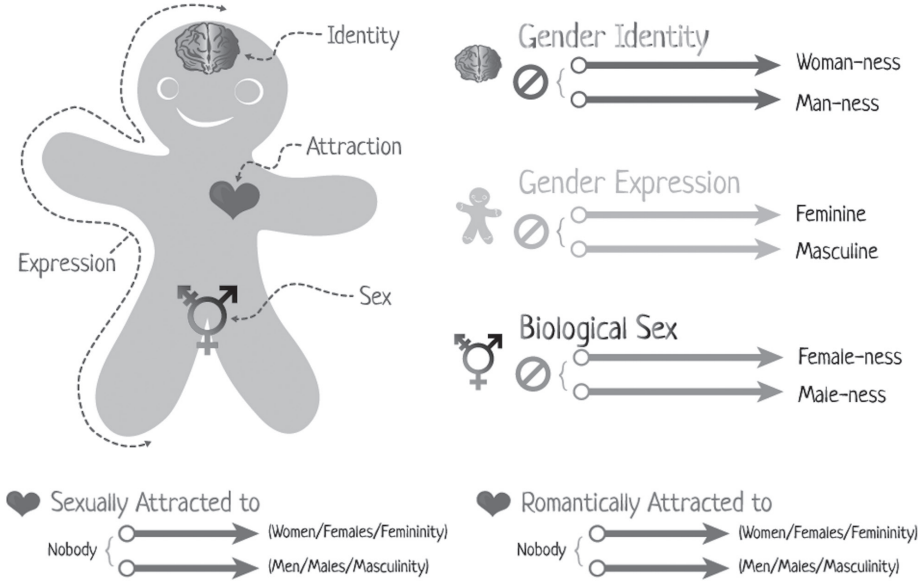


IMAGE 1 *The Genderbread Person v3.2 (Killermann, 2015).*

popular strategies of responding to this injustice in schools are unsatisfying at best and dangerous at worst. This problem will not be solved with one-hour or one-day training sessions in which cisgender teachers obediently confess their privileges as cisgender and learn the appropriate words to say and rituals to perform. This is constant work. It will not be solved by calling on students to identify their preferred pronoun at the beginning of the school year. Although it is imperative for students of all ages to be able to share what they need in order to feel respected in a classroom environment, ritual recitation is not critical pedagogy. Using this practice in isolation does not interrogate the social function of gendered pronouns or how and why our basic needs and self-expression become suppressed in classroom life. The acute manifestation of debates over pronouns as an institutional challenge in schools is symptomatic of a broader denial of agency to students who are systematically denied opportunities to shape expectations of basic respect and access in the classroom.⁵

The problem of society's failure to support trans people will not be solved by resources like the wildly popular Genderbread Person (image 1) that heavily rely on defining gender by drawing new lines across our bodies and minds. The graphic explains that gender identity ("woman-ness" or "man-ness") is

located in the mind, biological sex (“femaleness” or “maleness”) in the physical characteristics of the body, and sexual and romantic attraction (described as two separate things) in the heart. The image positions these three categories as distinct from one another.⁶

The trouble is, the Genderbread Person and similar terms-and-definitions-based materials simply replace one script with another. As Sam Killermann’s (2013, 2015) multiple revisions of the graphic suggest, fixed categories don’t stand the test of human ecology. The perceptions of the creators of these types of materials, as well as our own, are always limited by the social and geographic locations of our bodies in the world and the history of how we came to be where we are.

Resisting Essentialism and Embracing Complex Knowledge

The word *transgender* was originally designed to embrace complexity. First made popular nearly thirty years ago by US-based trans activist Leslie Feinberg (1992), it was intended as an umbrella term for all people who do not fit easily into a strict binary system of gender. The word emerged, in part, out of a desire for solidarity among those marginalized by dominant understandings of gender (Stryker & Whittle, 2006, p. 4). Further, Feinberg argued that transgender people were not essentially flawed, insisting instead that the violence and persecution faced by trans people were *societal* flaws resulting from a rigid enforcement of prescribed gender categories. Feinberg insisted that transgender identities were neither new nor unique to the United States and Western Europe and that Indigenous forms of transgender identities had become targets of oppression through European colonialism. Indeed, all over the world there are examples of terms for understanding nonbinary gender. This includes the Native American concept of *two-spirit* as well as *hijra* in South Asia, *kathoey* in Thailand, *mahu wahine* in Hawai’i, *baklâ* in the Philippines, *muxe* in Oaxaca, and *murumekadzi* and *mukadzirume* in Zimbabwe. These words do not translate directly to *transgender*; each has a unique contextual meaning. They reveal both the nonuniversality of any one system of gender and the incredible multiplicity of how gender is understood throughout the world.

The United States and Western Europe have exerted major effort in defining gender. A medical model of gender that has gained enormous power in the lives of transgender people can be traced as far back as the early-twentieth-century medical treatment of people whose genders were diagnosed as disordered and which doctors believed necessitated some form of correction or treatment. Though it has changed over time, largely in response to queer and trans activism, this general framework is still actively in use. “Gender Dysphoria” currently has its own chapter between “Sexual Dysfunction” and “Conduct Disorders” in the current edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* published by the American Psychiatric Association (2013). Gender dysphoria is characterized by an individual’s feelings of distress over the incongruence of one’s gender with one’s assigned sex. But as trans and disability

scholar-activist Eli Clare (2017) writes, “there is nothing inevitable, natural, or inherent” about gender dysphoria as a diagnosis (p. 142). Although these feelings are present for many trans people, many of us feel far *more* distress at the antagonistic societal conditions that surround us. This diagnosis firmly locates the treatable problem within an individual.

These strict, institutionalized, categorical definitions have grave consequences for our lives. In order to access many forms of transgender health care, one must conform to these diagnostic criteria. This leaves many trans people with a difficult choice of defining themselves using language recognized by the establishment that serves as a gatekeeper to care or facing the near-impossibility of gaining access to affirmative health-care options without having a diagnosis (Clare, 2017; Green, 2014; Poteat, German, & Kerrigan, 2013; Romeo, 2004; Serano, 2007; Spade, 2003).

Regardless of identity, we know—all of us—that gender is more complex than any single definition or category. We know about gender because we all participate in it every day. And yet many people rarely stop to think about what gender means. When we do, we might feel shame about the ways each of us do not conform to whatever particular idea of *man* or *woman* has been prescribed and projected onto our bodies. As trans activist and actress Laverne Cox noted, “The gender revolution I often imagine and talk about is really about us liberating ourselves from the oppression of expectations based on this gender model that none of us really fit anyway” (Kerr, 2013).

Transgender people are scapegoated for society’s shame over the impossibility of our current gender categories. This shame turns increasingly violent and hostile when a person appears to be outside the categories society sees as valuable, like whiteness and masculinity (Ellison, Green, Richardson, & Snorton, 2017; Mock, 2014; Serano, 2007). We do not need more imposed and enforced scripting of gender. Rather, we do desperately need ways to *be with* each other to ensure the survival of transgender people and others who do not strictly conform to a prescribed gender binary. For that we need pedagogies that allow us to share the complexities of our own unique embodied knowledge with one another and to question the limitations of that knowledge.

Unfortunately, many adults teach children the practice of oversimplification. This became clearer to me when I cofacilitated a workshop for a group of children between the ages of five and eleven as part of a conference focused on educational justice.⁷ We asked the children to draw a picture of a strong person, a pirate, and a ballet dancer. We told them to spread out around the room so that they could not see each other’s papers and gave them about ten minutes to draw. After the allotted time was up and the drawings were finished, we gathered in a circle to share. Despite being out of each other’s view while they worked, their portraits of the three characters were remarkably similar. Each portrait of a strong person had short hair, bulging biceps, and defined abdominal muscles. All of the ballet dancers were drawn with pastel colors and had long hair. All of the pirates had beards.⁸

I posed a question to the children: “How did you know how to draw these characters?” Most explained that they drew images similar to those they had seen on television or in movies.

“It looks like most of you drew ballet dancers that are girls. Is that true?”

They all nodded.

“Are all ballet dancers girls?”

Some were indignant, others giggled, but they all exclaimed “No!” in unison.

“If you know that, why do you think you drew them that way?”

To this there was a range of responses—“I’ve seen more ballet dancers that are girls,” “That’s what we’ve seen the most of,” “I’m a girl and I’m a ballet dancer so I drew myself.” One child emphatically stated, “You can be whatever you want, no matter if you are a boy or a girl.”

“What do the rest of you think about that?” I asked. The children responded with furious nodding and verbal affirmation. “Are a boy or a girl the only things you can be?”

Most of the kids were quiet and seemed to ponder the question, until one ten-year-old said, “Or you could be other.”

“Wait, what’s ‘other?’” a bespectacled seven-year-old wondered aloud.

The ten-year-old answered, “Well, some boys want to be girls, or some girls want to be boys. What’s that called? I think it’s called . . . ‘transgender.’”

Another child chimed in. “Oh, yeah, you have to have a really expensive surgery to be transgender.” This was met with another chorus of “Oh, yeah.”

My goal in designing the activity this way was not to trick the students but, rather, to find a way into a conversation that could spark some reflection about how they understand gender. Of course, this is just one small group of young children in an informal setting, and so the conclusions I can draw from it are modest. Yet, my experience in facilitating this workshop suggested to me that this group of children had internalized a default script about normative gender. Strong people and pirates are boys, and ballet dancers are girls. Even though, when prompted, they were all quick to point out that gender is more complex than their nearly uniform representations, that was not how they responded when called on by a person in power who they likely sought to please. Further, at least two of them had internalized messages about the meaning of *transgender*, one of which was premised on maintaining the gender binary (girl and boy are still the only options) and the other on the medical model of transition (you have to have surgery to be transgender⁹). I would venture to guess that this group’s simplified descriptions pasted over complex knowledge are not unique among children, just as they are not unique among adults.

Unscripting Gender

Understanding and learning from trans identity requires an active *unscripting* process, one resisting any sort of crystallized definition. Trans theory scholar Julia Serano (2007) writes that one of the fatal flaws of any gender theory

is its assumption that gender has any single meaning (p. 112). Through his work on the construction of learning disabilities in schools, Stanford education professor Raymond McDermott (1993) highlights the ways that prescriptive labels can come to acquire children, rather than the other way around. The combined knowledge of these two vastly different scholars underscores how important and valuable it is for teachers to become fluent in the varied contemporary language around gender and to also recognize that these terms are bounded by our individual interpretations of the world. The words each of us uses to describe gender depends on particular understandings of the body and are inextricably tied to other normative sorting devices, like race, class, and ability, which are also constantly acquiring people into their rigidity.

The acquisition of bodies by prescriptive concepts of gender has serious consequences for the lives we lead. As one example, nearly every state form of identification (e.g., birth certificates, driver's licenses, passports) displays some indication of a person's legal gender. In the United States, there are typically only two options for legal gender based on a concept of biological male and female sex, despite the fact that biologists have recognized our popular concept of biological sex as inaccurate. According to a 2015 news feature in the journal *Nature*, citing biologists from around the world, it is estimated that more than one in one hundred people are born with bodies whose biological structures do not conform to conventional notions of male and female (Ainsworth, 2015).¹⁰

In many states, a gender dysphoria diagnosis, surgery, and/or a letter from a medical professional (as well as prohibitively steep medical and legal fees) are required to change one's legal gender. Not only does this force our complex human bodies and lives narrowly into two possible boxes, these forms of identification are required to start a bank account, enroll in school, apply for food stamps, drive a car, vote, rent a home, see a doctor, get on an airplane—the list goes on. For those of us who do not easily fit into the anatomically based state definitions of male and female, our genders can become visibly outlawed in the act of producing identification. This means that mundane tasks like getting a library card can become overwhelmingly complicated, and higher-stakes interactions such as police encounters, emergency room visits, or entry into a homeless shelter can threaten trans peoples' safety or even lives (Waters & Wolfe, 2016; Spade, 2008, 2011).

These terms we use to describe bodies have the power to sort human beings into those who are normal and therefore recognized as valuable and those who are different and therefore seen as disposable. Although the school currently functions as a location to enforce state-defined gender, the classroom can provide possibilities for children to explore and experiment with how we might do things differently. I have been heartened by the nuance and creativity I have seen children bring to conversations about identity, by stories of children refusing to accept gender as it is defined for them, and by countless pieces of Internet media in which youth discuss and play with gender as they

understand it. In the ever-increasing push toward standardized curriculum designed for standardized tests, schools stand to risk missing out on these rich and important interactions that require both careful listening to and flexibility with children. As Paulo Freire (1970) noted, only actions that allow students to speak their own words to describe their own experiences will bring currently nonexistent conditions into reality. Our job as educators, then, is to serve as a dialogic partner with children in making meaning of these words for themselves and constructing new language and practice necessary for a less violent organization of our bodies in the world.

Resisting Definition

I cannot teach my students some essential meaning of the word *transgender*, nor should I. I cannot teach them what “transgender experience” is, nor should I—because I myself don’t know what it is. There is no universal definition or experience of transness, and any activity that does not actively resist the creation of false universality runs the risk of building a new script. I must work against my socialization in whiteness and masculinity that continues to teach me that I am an expert on trans identity simply because I live in a trans body. What I can offer my students is honesty and vulnerability in sharing my knowledge of my body and its history, alternatives to that understanding, an invitation to my students to reflect on and share their own experiential knowledge, and a model for responding to that knowledge with care. Making sense of the meaning of our bodies in the world requires a constant analysis of the intersectional manifestations (Crenshaw, 1991) of such institutionalized and hierarchical systems of race, gender, class, and ability while maintaining a keen awareness of the limitations of our own analytical vantage points.

Imagining Something Different: Guiding Questions for Educators

Every day the teacher candidates I work with ask me, “So, what should we do?” I am grateful to them for keeping me grounded. When it comes to the work of unscripting gender, I remind them that it is important to remember that teachers are not solely responsible for the normalization of binary gender—that is the work of an entire society. And while I appreciate their question, I do not offer them prescriptions, just as I will not offer one here. What I can provide are a few questions I use as intellectual guides in my own work that can perhaps be of some use:

- What are the scripts I have internalized about bodies in the world, including my own and my students’?
- How can I support my students in analyzing their own scripts?
- How can I support students in imagining something different?

I have provided some of my thoughts on the first two questions, so here I focus on the third. Prefabricated and standardized curricula are part of the

problem. This kind of teaching leads to acts of memorization and not knowing (Freire, 1970) and does not do justice to human intelligence. As with any other topic, educators must use the classroom as a space for children to make sense of the world around them. Therefore, we educators must consider how to create avenues for students to explore and play with gender as *they* understand it, inviting them into mutually respectful dialogue and asking them questions about the meaning and limits of those understandings, rather than forcing them to regurgitate our own rigid definitions. Identity as we know it has changed only when people have broken down previously held truths by sharing their own complex embodied experiences.

In my work as an elementary educator, what this means concretely is that, in addition to the necessary work of rethinking bathrooms and the other gendered school structures adults have created and imposed on children, my pedagogy must include free play and experiential inquiry. This cannot be compromised. In this time of increasing standardization in schooling, classroom educators are on the front lines protecting children's opportunities for creative play and problem solving drawn from their own experiences. In trying on costumes, building structures of their own design, and learning to interact with one another without explicit adult direction, free play offers children sites to construct and experiment with the possibilities they imagine and to act out and alter the realities they perceive. Decades of research illustrate the importance of children's play in language development (Andresen, 2005; Cook, 2000; Lovinger, 1974; Mundy, Sigman, Ungerer, & Sherman, 1987). This language development is important for textual literacy and general communication and equally crucial to the project of self-expression and the construction of a less violent world.

Experiential inquiry—the exploration of problems drawn from experience—allows children to explore the questions they have about the world by engaging directly with it. Something as simple as the costume closet, for example, holds infinite possible questions that are highly relevant to our lives: *What are all of the different ways to dress our bodies? When and how do we choose a costume? Is all clothing a costume? Who gets to wear a costume? Why? What might we call those costumes? Do those words always work? What new words can we create?* Or, as children witness situations inside or outside the classroom that they perceive as unfair or unjust, we might ask them, *How did we get here? How can we do something different?* Both questions offer as many opportunities for research and action as for discussion.

Listening and Learning

A critical transgender pedagogy emerges from the infinitely varied experiences of trans people who refuse to be caged by definition. We live in a world where the state enforcement of binary gender categorization makes trans bodies impossible and has violent consequences for too many of us. The contin-

ued suffering of trans people does not come from some flawed understanding of ourselves but, rather, from the crude inadequacy of a prescriptive gender binary. In the work of education, there is no more time to waste on preserving systems of prescribed gender or creating new rigid categories to be imposed onto other people's bodies. Too many lives have been lost.

We need pedagogies that concentrate more of our efforts on inviting people to be with each other in our full humanity. We need pedagogies that deeply examine how our current gender system confines us all and how that interacts with other systems, like race, class, and ability. We need pedagogies that aim toward the immediately necessary projects of preventing the murders and suicides of trans people in addition to preventing our slower deaths at the hands of inadequate medical and legal systems. We need pedagogies that listen to transgender experience in all its forms.

Accepting the task of listening to and learning from children's experiences is one of the great responsibilities of humanity. It will be up to younger generations to use their imaginations to bring a different material reality to life. Existing in dialogue with that imaginative exploration is central to the work of education. Though the stakes are high, even a matter of life and death, this necessary dialogue is full of beauty and wonder. We have much to gain in our work toward greater survival.

Notes

1. Throughout this essay, I use the words *trans* and *transgender* interchangeably.
2. Gender reveal parties, at which parents reveal the sex assignment of a baby before birth, have grown in popularity and have been subject to critique. See Winter (2016).
3. These figures represent all respondents to the survey. When the data are disaggregated by race, they reveal that the rates of mistreatment and physical attacks are much higher for trans students of color: 92 percent of American Indian and 84 percent of Middle Eastern trans people reported mistreatment; 49 percent of American Indian and 36 percent of Middle Eastern trans people reported physical attacks (James et al., 2016).
4. All student names are pseudonyms. I use the pronoun *he* per Dylan's preference.
5. See examples in Bever (2016a,b), Bukiet (2015), and Reis (2016).
6. Versions of the Genderbread Person graphic have been shared online more than 173,000 times (Killermann, 2015), and a TED talk by its designer, Sam Killermann, has been viewed more than 250,000 times (Killermann, 2013). Killermann was also featured in the recent National Geographic documentary *Gender Revolution*, in which he used the Genderbread Person to explain gender to Katie Couric and millions of viewers at home.
7. I am grateful to my colleague Sofia Corporan for developing this workshop with me.
8. Coincidentally, a similar activity was featured in a British film about gender stereotypes that only highlights the international pervasiveness of this phenomenon (Chan, 2016).
9. According to trans legal scholar Dean Spade (2011), "The vast majority of trans people do not undergo surgery, both because it is prohibitively expensive and because many people do not want or need it. The common misperception that surgery is the hallmark of trans experience is particularly harmful to populations disproportionately lacking access to medical care, including low-income people, people of color, immigrants, and youth" (p. 145).

10. These biological variations are commonly known as intersex traits. *Intersex* does not equate with *transgender*, but both identities challenge a prescribed binary system of gender. Some people born with intersex traits identify as transgender, and some don't. Beginning in the 1950s, physicians began performing surgeries on infants with intersex traits to make their genitals look "normal" in response to "intense social pressure to conform to the binary model" (Ainsworth, 2015). These procedures are almost always medically unnecessary and can be safely postponed until an individual can participate in the decision (Zillén, Garland, & Slokenberga, 2017, pp. 43–45). This practice has been condemned by the United Nations, the World Health Organization, and Amnesty International.

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