



Jody Keisner

## Gender Identity in Personal Writing: Contextualizing the Syllabi

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I had not yet proposed a writing course on gender to my department when a student, stopping by my office, noticed the copies of *Whipping Girl*, *Gender Failure*, and *Gender Outlaw* stacked on my desk. One eyebrow shot up. “Why are *you* reading all of this trans stuff?” he asked. He was in another creative nonfiction class I taught, where he’d told the room on the first day that his name was Greg, *he, his, and him*—not the name on the roster I’d read or the pronouns it suggested. (Now, on the first day of class, I send the roster around the room and ask students to sign-in with the names they use). The intonation in his question was understandable: sitting behind the cluttered desk, nearby a framed picture of her husband and young daughter, was a white, cis woman. A woman in her late 30’s, who a year earlier, might not have known what cis-gender meant.

I could have offered Greg the stiff academic answer that sprang to mind: “Marginalized groups can utilize writing as a way to resist oppression. The LGBTQ community and its authors are a vital part of society and literature and the creative writing classroom needs to do a better job reflecting that.” Feeling self-conscious, I instead answered, “I’m researching for a writing class that will explore gender for the entire semester.”

Greg’s eyebrow relaxed. “Oh,” he said. “You should read *Redefining Realness* by Janet Mock.” Thanking him, I wrote it down, and we resumed our previous conversation.

Where I teach in the heartland of Nebraska, often listed as one of the top 10 most conservative states in the nation, the bulk of the students who select English classes have been raised in white, middle-

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class families; the same is true of the bulk of our creative writing faculty. It's important to note, however, that the university as a whole reflects more diversity, with 38% of its 2017 freshman class being first-generation college students and 32% being "ethnically diverse" ("About UNO: Facts and Figures"). Still, the fact that Greg was one of two students of color and the only student to publicly identify as trans in our class together was not surprising to me. In retrospect, it was also a reflection of my curriculum, which—other than the occasional and over-relied upon essay by the likes of David Sedaris, James Baldwin, or Dorothy Allison—was not truly LGBTQ-inclusive.

The most recently published survey by GLSEN reports that less than twenty-three percent of K-12 students are exposed to positive representations of LGBTQ people or issues in high school ("2015 National School Climate Survey"). Other than in California and with the passage of the FAIR Education Act, few public schools include LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum, and seven states have laws (referred to as "no promo homo" laws) that explicitly prevent educators from teaching *any* LGBTQ issues. Thus, when students arrive at college and take seats in our classrooms, they are likely ignorant about the significant historical, cultural, and artistic contributions of the LGBTQ community; they've been immersed in heterosexist classroom norms since kindergarten. I recently heard the poet Ching-In Chen ask a room of approximately sixty college students, academics, and writers at a writing conference if they "were assigned to read any writer who publicly identified as trans, nonbinary and/or intersex in an undergraduate creative writing and/or literature class." Only a handful of people replied in the affirmative. The danger should be apparent: Michelle L. Page writes in "From Awareness to Action: Teacher Attitude and Implementation of LGBT-Inclusive Curriculum in the English Language Arts Classroom" that ignoring LGBTQ writers in our curriculum renders those communities "invisible" and "tacitly condone[s] homophobia" (13). Further, a failure to explore LGBTQ issues is "likely related to discriminatory practices that compromise school safety and students' ability to learn" (Snapp et al. 251). It's known widely that gender diverse students experience considerably higher levels of harassment than straight, cis students. The "AAU Climate Survey

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on Sexual Assault and Sexual Misconduct (2015)” reported that 50% to 75% of LGBTQ college students experience sexual harassment and/or assault. LGBTQ students suffer statistically significant rates of bullying, school drop-out, depression, drug use, self-harm, and suicide. However, the addition of LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum has already shown positive results when implemented in California high schools: “all students, including heterosexual, LGBTQ, and gender non-conforming students felt safer, experienced less victimization, reported hearing fewer homophobic slurs, and experienced greater peer acceptance” (Snapp et al. 251). My university’s nondiscrimination statement, which appears in the student handbook, on course syllabi, and flyers for campus events, states that the university will not discriminate based on sexual orientation or gender identity, among other things. However, discrimination against gender diverse students takes many forms, some of which are overt and some of which are subtle, and some of which I wouldn’t have recognized before I began my own education of gender identity—an education that is continuing: “If teachers and administrators truly respect and care for all students, we must be willing to transform our curricula to address issues of sexual orientation and gender identity” (Page 13). Straight, cis faculty like myself must stop using a lack of “comfort, awareness, and experience” with LGBTQ topics as an excuse not to teach an LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum (Page 3-5).

In the years between my conversation with Greg and my first teaching this class, I continued my gender identity education in earnest: I attended Safe Space training (which includes LGBTQIA+ Basics Orientation and an Active Ally Workshop), researched pedagogical approaches to teaching LGBTQ literature, read *Redefining Realness* (2014) and dozens of other books and essays that explore gender, and sought guidance from friends, colleagues, scholars, and students. I embraced the “pedagogical shifts” (Helmer 35) that transform classrooms into a place “to explore traditionally silenced discourses and create spaces for students to examine and challenge the hierarchy of binary identities that is created and supported by schools, such as jock-nerd, sciences-arts, male-female, white-black, rich-poor, and gay-straight” (Meyer 27). In order for straight teachers to “transform their praxis” (Meyer 15) into one that

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aligns with a queer theoretical approach, like the one Elizabeth J. Meyer describes in “‘But I’m Not Gay’: What Straight Teachers Need to Know about Queer Theory,” they needn’t alter or exhibit their sexuality. Rather, transforming one’s praxis “simply calls for the education of educators and requires their active participation regarding how ‘normalcy’ is defined” (Zacko-Smith and Smith 77). It’s worth repeating that our own education as educators is key; too often, LGBTQ writers and experiences are rendered to the margins of course content, viewed by students as “other” and “abnormal,” reinforcing heteronormativity despite educators’ best intentions (Page 11; Snapp et. al 251-4; Zacko-Smith and Smith 76-77).

I don’t claim to be an expert on gender identity, but I know creative nonfiction, I assure my students, and it’s an empowering genre, ripe for the work we’re setting out to do together. Barrie Jean Borich in “The Craft of Writing Queer” compares the “fluidity of gender in the queer community” to the “shifting genre parameters of this new-but-old literary category.” Accordingly, creative nonfiction is a genre that can challenge heteronormative storytelling while also opening up the umbrella for non-normative stories, not just in subject matter but also in style and form. In this article, I outline one approach to bringing LGBTQ writers from the margins to the center of the creative nonfiction classroom.

### **Course Philosophy**

The intended audience for my course “Gender Identity in Personal Writing” are undergraduates who have completed their general education composition requirements. Because my English course has no additional pre-requisites and is cross-listed with Women’s & Gender Studies and LGBTQ/Sexualities Studies, it attracts a wider variety of majors and minors than from what normally populates my English classes. It’s also an elective, and the students that have filled the seats up to the present have expressed a vested interest in gender identity and/or creative nonfiction. In other words, while their experience with the topics might be limited, I’ve discovered that their willingness to explore the topics has not been. Keeping in mind the varying levels of knowledge of gender identity and creative nonfiction my students would

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likely have, I designed the course to introduce them to the basic concepts of each, offering students time and practice with new concepts—engagement with “diverse sexualities and genders” and “new lines of thinking and understanding” (Helmer 35)—while gradually building to more nuanced and challenging explorations of gender identity and creative nonfiction.

The tone for the course is established with a quote from Judith Butler in reference to her book *Gender Trouble* (1990): “The aim of the book was to open up the field of possibility for gender without dictating which kinds of possibilities ought to be realized.” Butler argues in *Gender Trouble* that gender is a cultural rather than natural phenomenon, and that it’s fluid rather than binary. Of course, that’s a simplified summary of social constructionism and Butler’s argument, and other writers my students and I discuss, like Julia Serano in *Whipping Girl* (2016), argue that aspects of gender *are* natural and that gender is shaped by both intrinsic and extrinsic factors, like language and culture. To deny the organic development of gender, “an amalgamation of bodies, development, and behaviors,” (107) writes Serano in *Excluded, Make Feminist and Queer Movements More Inclusive* (2013), is to deny the experience of trans people who identify as female or male. Serano argues that there is no one true way to understand gender, and to attempt to define it without recognizing its many complications risks disempowering groups of people, often those people who are already at greatest risk of marginalization. Thus, our goal is to investigate the many possibilities of gender identity and expression as told through the lenses of theory and personal experience. To help us with our investigation, we circle back to a few key questions: *what role does gender perception play in society? What experiences have led to our understanding of gender? Is our and others’ experience of gender only ever oppressive? In what ways is “gender-busting”—busting gender norms and the gender binary—valuable to us as people? In what ways is “genre-busting”—busting traditional forms and expectations for the discipline—valuable to us as writers?* My students and I discuss these and other questions but are not in pursuit of definitive answers; rather, we continue to “trouble” (Meyer 28) our thinking. The classroom becomes “a place to question,

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explore, and seek alternative explanations rather than a place where knowledge means ‘certainty, authority, and stability’” (Meyer 27). The classroom becomes a place of possibilities.

### **Part 1: Defining Creative Nonfiction & The Longform Essay**

During the first two weeks, while my students are also assigned introductory material on the definition of creative nonfiction and the conventions that help define it, I bring a Safe Space training to my class for a week, taught by staff from the Gender & Sexuality Resource Center on our campus. During the training, we begin to develop the lexicon we will use throughout the semester, while noting, as Serano does, that these words are not “written down in stone, indelibly passed down from generation to generation” (*Whipping Girl* 23). Words evolve right along with our understanding of gender. (See evolving definitions at “Vocabulary Extravaganza” at [The SafeZoneProject.com](http://TheSafeZoneProject.com) or “Queer and Trans Spectrum Definitions” at the University of Nebraska at Omaha’s [LGBTQIA+ Resources](#)).

To further explore the spectrums of gender and sexuality and to promote new ways of thinking about them, we complete a Gender Unicorn worksheet, which features an infographic of a unicorn designed by Trans Student Educational Resources. Four of the five aspects of sexuality and gender represented by the Gender Unicorn—gender identity, gender expression, sexual attraction, and emotional attraction—are presented on a continuum. The only static option on the worksheet is “sex assigned at birth.” Some of my students express surprise at visually discovering their own fluidity with the categories, especially when they contextualize the worksheet within specific memories from their childhood through adulthood. For instance, one student explained that she felt her gender expression had evolved from a more stereotypically feminine expression, reinforced by her parents’ clothing, toy, and hairstyle choices for her as a young child, to a more stereotypically masculine one. Further troubling students’ understanding of gender as either-or (normal-abnormal), facilitators of the workshop introduce positive phrases and words such as “fluid gender expression” and “gender questioning” to describe diverse gender expressions that

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many of my students have only previously heard described negatively. These activities and the discoveries that result prepare students for the essays we're about to read, inviting them to "question and 'trouble' all that is passively assumed and taken for granted in society" (Meyer 28), especially their pre-conceived notions about their own and others' gender identities.

During the training, we're also asked to name three lesbian, gay, and transgender historical figures. More often than not, my students can't name three in each group. More often than not, only one or two students can name a transgender historical figure, and the historical figures they name are often TV celebrities. Shannon D. Snapp et al. in "Students Perspectives on LGBTQ-Inclusive Curriculum" writes that California high school students who were surveyed about their experiences with LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum reported that the inclusion "improved their learning and well-being and [that students] were generally thrilled when teachers taught lesson that were relevant to their lives and experiences" (259). One student elaborated, "Seeing that LGBTQ people have been present and fighting for rights and visibility as long as any other group helped my classmates accept and understand them" (Snapp et al. 257). Conversely, LGBTQ students who didn't find themselves represented positively in the curriculum reported having less confidence in their abilities to succeed and expressed negative feelings regarding their futures (Snapp et al.).

Beginning the semester with an awareness of our language choices is crucial, and so I assign my students Alice Walker's "Becoming What We're Called," an essay that opens up a space for us to discuss what *we've* been called, the pronouns that we use, and how those words and names have shaped our identities. During a tour of *Warrior Marks*, a film Walker and a female colleague made about female genital mutilation, Walker notices how often they are addressed as "you guys." She writes, "The women asking us these questions seemed blind to us, and in their blindness we felt our uniqueness as female creators disappear" (312). It's an essay and a subject that's been around for a while, but many undergraduate students haven't thought about the implications of their casual, and often frequent, Midwestern use of

“you guys.” *Do our pronouns make us more or less visible to others? What does it feel like to be misgendered? What are the larger cultural and social implications of being misgendered?* We discuss, among other examples, the media’s frequent use of “dead names” when referring to trans victims and how the practice of dead-naming is used to deny trans people their gender identities. One student described their family’s insistence on dead-naming them as “dehumanizing” and “intentionally cruel.”

My purpose after the Safe Space training is twofold: to continue probing the possibilities of gender identity and expression in the creative nonfiction we read and compose, and to study the craft elements of the genre. Exploring one’s gender identity and understanding culturally enforced gender roles is an essential part of exploring one’s narrative persona, the performative “I” in creative nonfiction. To this end, we read “First” by Ryan Van Meter, both for its imagistic exploration of a young boy’s first love, his best boyhood friend, and for its illustration of a standard narrative arc. Learn the standard forms, I tell my students, many of whom are studying creative nonfiction for the first time, and then learn why, when, and how to push against them.

Other readings for Part I that I’ll highlight include longform essays that explore received notions of masculinity and femininity—and how tradition can be simultaneously limiting and liberating for some—while also modeling a range of writing styles and forms. For example, we read Silas Hansen’s traditionally-structured essay “Just a Guy at the Bar,” where Hansen explores why he feels most comfortable—and accepted—as a trans man, who is also a “social justice-minded feminist,” while watching football in his Bills jersey with other regulars at a local bar. Hansen’s love of football, which he concedes is problematic given the long-term health consequences for players, is complicated and resists resolution, reinforcing the idea that our writing is a place for questioning and discovery, but not necessarily certainty. We study Sara Hendery’s segmented essay “[Dangerous] Language,” where she observes intersections of gender, race, class, and language among the underprivileged high school students she teaches. Hendery writes: “Words stay in the body the way lead is still visible after being erased.” We marvel



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over Nathan Schaaf’s analysis of the representation—or lack of—all-things-vagina in language and discourse, popular culture, and more in his humorous collage essay “My Vagina.” Schaaf, a self-described “pop culture aficionado” asks: “How could I [...] have missed the inclusion of the word vagina in broadcast circulation up until now, when I had uncovered the vast mystery of the penis from a 1982 alien invasion film – I can only enjoy a viewing of *E.T.* if I think of it this way – and I wondered: where had all of the vaginas been?” We discuss Sarah A. Chavez’s “The Female Body at the Front of the Room.” In the latter, Chavez, a Chican@ writer and half first-generation college graduate, asks about her first day teaching college writing: “Wasn’t the fact that I knew what I was talking about and was at the front of the room enough?” In sum, the answer is “no,” at least from her students’ perspectives. My students consider the same question in response to their first-day impressions of me and their other professors. One of my students answered:

I’d like to say I don’t view instructors differently based on appearance of gender, but I don’t think that’s possible (for anyone). I feel like that claim would be akin to claiming not to see color. I can definitely attest to having made assumptions about teachers based on their clothing or appearances, even while being conscious of the fact that those assumptions were unfounded, unfair, and rooted in patriarchy.

Our readings, resulting dialogues, and exploration through our own creative nonfiction writing build our foundation for questioning heteronormative and cis understandings of gender as either-or (and the far-reaching effects of the gender binary on culture; for example, students “making assumptions about teachers based on their clothing or appearances.”)

During these early weeks, students also participate in Harvard’s online Implicit Association Test, which “measures the strength of associations between concepts (e.g., black people, gay people) and evaluations (e.g., good, bad) or stereotypes (e.g., athletic, clumsy)” (“Project Implicit”). They complete the Sexuality IAT, Gender-Career IAT, Gender-Science IAT, and one additional IAT of their choosing. Our

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discoveries lead to a thought-provoking and often uncomfortable discussions of our own biases and blind spots, narrative persona and self-awareness, and the binary identities that we've, perhaps unwillingly, subscribed to. We all inevitably have biases, and so with this activity, are reminded that we have work to do to resist and unlearn the stereotypes that permeate our culture; we all have work to do in order to accept and appreciate each other's differences.

## **Part II: Flash Essays**

We begin Part II of the course with the book *Gender Failure* (2014), co-authored by self-described “gender failures” (gender nonconformists) Ivan E. Coyote and Rae Spoon, and based on their traveling musical performance of the same name. The book is multimodal and experimental: in between the chapters are micro-essays by Coyote, pictures of Coyote and Spoon's traveling performance, handwritten song lyrics, hand-drawn illustrations, and—preceding Spoon's chapter “Man Failure, Part I”—a Gender Identity Interview for Adults (FtM) given to Coyote by a medical professional, one of many gatekeepers to the top surgery that he desires. The chapters, which are told chronologically and alternate between Spoon and Coyote, are short, fashioned like flash memoirs, and present opportunities for my students and me to also discuss elements of narrative. As one of my students exclaimed: “the book is genre-bustingly amazing.”

Among other topics, the authors explore their childhoods, the medical and social transitions they make—or refuse to make—as adults, transphobia within queer communities, the artistic pursuits that unite them, the progression in their choices of pronouns, and seemingly ordinary events that cis people take for granted but which, as one of my students astutely observed, “relentlessly intersect with gender for trans people.” For example, in the chapter titled “Danger,” Coyote is witness to a hit-and-run and, after calling an ambulance and waiting with the older pedestrian who has been hit, is asked by a male cop: “Do you, uh, have a gender?” When Coyote quips “Yes, I do,” the cop turns hostile: “Are we going to have a problem

here?” (246). Likewise, in Spoon’s chapter “How to Be a Transgender Country Singer,” Spoon (who uses the pronouns they, them, and theirs) has finished a tour and reflects: “Everything went okay: there was a lot of misgendering, but no physical threats” (131). Never assuming their safety because of their gender identity, Spoon considers it a victory that they weren’t threatened with violence—something that most cis people would have taken for granted.

In sections that students find bits of themselves in (and relate to their early exposure to gender roles in their own households and communities), both authors also reflect on their childhood years and gender expectations. For example, in “Girl Failure,” Coyote recalls how the development of breasts came between him and his best friend Janine. (Coyote uses the pronouns she, her, and hers as a young child; then he, him, and his; and later, after “retiring” from gender, uses they, them, and theirs.) He recalls that Janine’s breasts—a “C cup, easy”—along with boys, cheerleading, and a final fourth thing set them apart. The final fourth thing is a slumber party that Coyote recalls in clear, vivid detail. He remembers eating the “Chinese food instead of fried chicken because the cheerleaders wouldn’t eat fried foods” (23), watching *Pretty in Pink* (instead of Janine’s and his usual selection, *Monty Python*), and falling asleep early in his Smokey the Bear sleeping bag. And then he remembers Janine’s betrayal, laughing at his flat chest and his hairless armpits: “I have been carrying that night with me for thirty years, and just now was the first time I ever put it down. Put it down in words” (25). Coyote puts down this painful memory, both literally and figuratively, and shows my students how writing can be an act of empowerment and emancipation. He doesn’t vilify Janine and her new flock of cheerleading friends. He writes the story honestly and with clarity and lets us—the readers—decide what we want to about her slumber party behavior.

Spoon’s chapters are equally striking in narrative artistry and intellectual explorations of the gender binary. In the chapter “My Body Is a Spaceship,” Spoon, recalling puberty, writes: “People started telling me that I was becoming a woman, but I knew that that was just on the outside; inside I was going to stay the same: ambivalent to the confusing expectations that surrounded me” (115-6). Later in the same

chapter, Spoon has researched the sterilization of transgender people that results from gender-reassignment surgery: “I no longer believed in the gender or sex binaries as if they were laws of nature. [...] My childhood idea that my body was a spaceship came back to me. I was not in the wrong body. I was in the wrong world” (120). I include these specific passages here to illustrate both the political issues woven into the narrative and the intimacy and charisma of the narrative itself.

*Gender Failure* represents many of my students’ first exposure to writers whose identity as gender-nonconforming, writers who eventually retire from gender altogether, and some of our classroom discussions become tense as we explored the deleterious belief that there are “acceptable gay people who perform in normative ways and the ‘less socially acceptable’ ones who transgress gender norms” (Helmer 42), a classroom exercise I modeled from one described in Kirsten Helmer’s article: “Gay and lesbian literature disrupting the heteronormative space of the high school English classroom.” Helmer writes:

...having to engage student readers with their own internalised prejudices [...] may produce moments of discomfort or even crisis as students encounter their own complicity with oppressive thinking. However, instead of shying away from such discomforting moments, teachers should embrace them as catalysts for learning and provide opportunities for students to enter and work through such discomfort or crisis. (42)

Students are provided opportunities to “work through such discomfort” (Helmer 42) in face-to-face and online class discussions, low-stakes writing prompts, and high-stakes writing assignments. Not only does the practice of exposing oneself to nonconforming expressions of gender and sexuality aid students in confronting their own prejudices, but it also has the ability to “undo a prior conception of who one is only to inaugurate a relatively newer one” (Butler 1). In other words, LGBTQ literature and discourse has the power to inspire students to (re)claim their gender identities through the powerful act of (re)writing them. The essays that my students write illustrate their own experiences of gender identity, their discoveries of

their own resistance, submission to, or acceptance of the gender identities their families, their communities, and others have assigned them. Above all, their essays became a safe place for exploration, questioning, discovery, and naming of their identities.

For our continued study of the flash essay, we read *Brevity* Issue #49 in its entirety. Essays in this issue, guest edited by Sarah Einstein and Silas Hansen, explore gender as it intersects with race, class, religion, ability, body, age, sexuality, and more. Flash essays in this issue prompt the following questions: *What expectations do we place on a female body? A male body? A genderqueer body? A body of color? And how do people react if someone doesn't meet these expectations? In what ways can an experimental form illustrate the complexities of gender? What does discrimination look like? We return to the course's key questions when talking back to these flash essays with flash essays of our own: What is gender? How is it formed? What is its role in our lives? Can you be freed from it? Would you want to be freed from it? What have the people in your life taught you about gender? How have those lessons affected you?*

Students read, for instance, a “Mea Culpa” by Brian Doyle who confesses: “I laughed at the idea of gay guys battling cops hand-to-hand at Stonewall, noting that *that* must have been a brief battle” and later, “I started paying attention. I started listening. I stopped sneering and snickering. I began to hear the pummel of blows rained down on people for merely being who they were.” We read a manifesto on gender by Kate Bornstein, who claims, “I think we can all take a moment, breathe, and understand the unarguable definitive truth that gender is relative”; and the segmented flash essay “Genderfuck” where Madison Hoffman writes, “Your sixth grade biology teacher liked to talk about ecological systems. Niches, she said, were the place of an animal in the system, the place where it belonged. [...] You find your niche, haul yourself into it like a drowning person escaping the water. Genderqueer. Androgyne. Transgender.” Students found themselves or their friends and loved ones represented in these essays, and their increasing appreciation of the complexities of both gender identity and creative nonfiction were evident in our class discussions. Participating in an online discussion of “Genderfuck,” one student wrote:

Each segment of the essay has to do with words, names, and labels, which is very appropriate for the topic. The piece shows how difficult it can be to find the right label for you when others hide these terms or actively scorn them. I thought the section about biological niches was especially perfect: “The place of an animal in the system, the place where it belonged.” The author is trying to find their own niche, their own place in the system of gender and society, even if it takes several tries to get it right. I related to that idea a lot, since I went through a few different labels when I was first questioning my sexuality. Even when you do find the right label, it can be hard to fully admit it to yourself.

And another:

I love segmented essays. I love the freedom it gives you to jump back and forth in time and still keep a continuous thread and to be able to keep things connected. I like the way this essay uses the segmentation to cover a large chunk of time and semi-similar events. And I like the sharpness it gives, each event a pinpoint in the overall picture of the author's realization.

### **Part III: Multimodal Essays**

We conclude the semester by exploring how layering modalities onto text can enhance, challenge, complicate, and sometimes muddy our interpretations of and reactions to a true story. I tell my students that multimodal essays, which include “video essays,” are at the forefront of experimental creative nonfiction and yet are often met with resistance from the literary world, as they don’t fit the mold of the well-respected, traditionally-written narrative. Yet, multimodal essays present unique audio and visual opportunities for writers to challenge the gender binary and illustrate the fluidity of gender identity. To illustrate, I begin this unit by presenting my students with a transcript of “Dust Off,” a segmented video

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essay by Eula Biss and John Bresland, though in order for this exercise to work, I omit the byline and don't disclose the essay's multimodality. The narrator of "Dust Off" describes the accidental, self-inflicted deaths of three high school boys, and even at this late date in the semester, my students quickly assume that the narrator is male. When pressed, they admit that the text is absent of gender-signifiers in this regard and that they based their assumptions on the narrator's intimacy with the topic. My students describe "Dust Off" as an exploration of male risk-taking and pleasure-seeking, which leads to us questioning *why* we equate these traits with boyhood and not with girlhood or childhood in general. Next, I add the audio mode and we listen to "Dust Off," discussing *how* and *why* our perceptions of the essay change with the added mode, particularly with the additions of the female-sounding narrator and the plunking of out-of-tune piano keys—sounds all working together to create the somber, haunting tone of the essay. Finally, my students view the video essay in its entirety, analyzing, among other visual elements, the metaphorical use of a pulsating jellyfish to represent one of the boy's attempts to achieve a "religious experience" through orgasm. We further examine the rhetorical significance of various camera angles and basic filmic techniques, underscoring the intentionality behind the writers' choices; for example, their choice to utilize images that are gender-neutral when the text and narrator are not. A deconstruction of a particular essay's modes can also be done in reverse: I mute the sound and have students watch a video essay, asking them to rely on visual elements in theorizing the possible themes the essay is illustrating, focusing particularly on images that illustrate aspects of gender identity.

Among others, we also view the video essay: "Meet the World's Youngest Female Monster Truck Driver" by Kathryn Boyd-Batstone, a profile of Rosalee Ramer, who is a stereotype-breaking, professional monster truck driver at age fourteen. In the video, Ramer says: "The first thing I do is go out and hit anything anyone thinks I can't hit and then I get to watch them kind of destroy their trucks trying to do one better than me." Ramer's father describes her as a "little bit of everything" which my students interpreted to be his response to her combination of masculine and feminine traits and interests. My

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students analyze how the combination of image and sound worked to further illustrate the concept of gender-busting. A student observed: “She looks conventionally feminine and sings along to pop songs on pink headphones while working on her truck. It fits in with Bornstein’s thoughts on how gender roles are too rigid and that no one out there completely fits society’s definition of a certain gender.” We also watch “That Kind of Daughter,” a stop-motion animation essay by Kristen Radtke that explores gender expectations as they relate to the dynamics of the mother-daughter relationship and feminine expressions of love. Recalling how she watched her mother affectionately tend to their family’s baby chicks, which her mother calls “my girls,” Radtke reflects: “I do not know this kind of tenderness. I do not love anything this way. [...] I can feel their bones, and I must fight to keep my fingers from pulling tighter and tighter, just to know the sound of it.” While Radtke talks, an image of a disembodied hand tightly holding a baby chick disappears and reappears in pieces, further troubling cultural expectations that a woman be nurturing.

With these multimodal texts, I regularly assign chapters or sections from *Gender Outlaw* (1994). Bornstein’s gender-pioneering book is famous for bending form, genre, and gender ideology in many exciting and surprising ways. However, some of my students cited the imperfections in the book, too: Bornstein’s failure to thoroughly address trans-misogyny and the patriarchal roots of the gender binary, her usage of now-outdated and offensive terms like “tranny” and other shortcomings that should be considered before one endeavors to teach this text—some of which she addresses in the updated 2016 version of her book and other publications. For instance, Bornstein has explained in interviews that she is taking back “tranny” and views it as a powerful word—a word that she describes in a 2010 blog post as “invented by the queerest of the queer of their day” (“The Trouble With Tranny”). Without the proper scaffolding built into a course or one’s personal reading list, some readers might mistakenly believe that Bornstein’s unique experiences, viewpoints, and gender identity are representative of *all* trans people. On the other hand, even twenty-four years after its first copyright, *Gender Outlaw* successfully pushes against



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what Borich calls “sentimental definitions of love, marriage, monogamy, childrearing, family, and friendship.” If I choose to teach this text (I alternate books), I teach it toward the end of the term, when my students and I are prepared to also discuss the ways it’s problematic. It becomes not only a model to refer to when discovering experimental structures and forms for our own creative nonfiction but also becomes a springboard for lively debate; and there are questions that serve as writing prompts on most pages.

Over the course of the semester, my students express varying levels of acceptance for the concepts they are introduced to. They also continually challenge texts, ideas, and narrators during class discussions, in their own essays, and in their analytical responses to books. For example, consider my student’s response to a question Bornstein asks in *Gender Outlaw*, Chapter 8 “Gender Terror, Gender Rage”: “So what happens to the person who finds out that he or she has been duped or disappointed by some aspect of gender?” (80). My student responded:

[A] level of uncertainty for me involved this (hypothetical?) person’s understanding of their own gender identity. The question about this person “how does someone come to terms with some inner ambiguity of gender” asserts pretty plainly that this person has an inner uncertainty about their gender identity. Is this assertion something Bornstein believes is true of everybody, or does Bornstein mean something more like ‘people who have some inner ambiguity of gender’?

My student explained that he didn’t feel ambiguous about his gender identity, and he resisted Bornstein’s claim that “Eventually the gender system lets everyone down” (80). Other students predictably disagreed, sharing stories from their own lives that they argued supported Bornstein’s assertion. One student quipped: “Gender is *fa-aake*.”

## Coda

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As I teach my students to interrupt conventionally-written narratives and received ideas that privilege the gender binary, I teach them about the complexities of the world and the ways their writing can reflect that complexity; the hope is to also improve the classroom climate for LGBTQ and other minority students. The pedagogical challenge is to educate ourselves first—especially those who are like me—so that our efforts don't inadvertently reinforce heterosexist classroom norms. As teachers, we already accept that education is an ongoing, active process; the same is true of our own education regarding the increasingly diverse body of learners in our classrooms when we do not come from those diverse positions ourselves.

The work matters. Recently, a student from my gender identity class emailed me seeking advice about an incident in another class. Rachel, who asked to be named in this article, identifies as gender fluid and wrote that some of the words spoken by a professor on our campus had bothered her and other LGBTQ students in the class and had potentially “closed a door” between them. *Transvestite. Transgendered.* At one point during the professor's lecture, drag shows were inaccurately referred to as “trans shows.” There was more, too. Rachel planned to write the professor an email explaining why the word choices were harmful, and she wanted me to have a look before she sent it. She was nervous: “I must be brave, or what's it all for?” I agreed to help; I also directed her to a colleague who worked at the Gender & Sexuality Resource Center, someone who *is* an expert on gender identity. Rachel wanted to be respectful of her professor's authority in the classroom but felt compelled to address the incident, because, as she eventually wrote to her professor: “[...] transgender people are some of the most marginalized within the LGBT community, even though they've had such a large impact on the progression of LGBT civil rights (ex: Stonewall was led by trans women of color).” Later, as we continued our discussion of the incident, she told me that if the class were a Safe Space training, she and some of her other classmates “would've been saying ouch nonstop.” Just a handful of years ago, I wouldn't have known what an “ouch” was in this context and why the words that the professor used were offensive. Rachel didn't name the other professor

and I didn't press her to. Truly, it could have been any one of a number of us. Just a few years ago, it could have been me.

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