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INTRODUCTION



Transgender and gender expansive education research, policy and practice: reflecting on epistemological and ontological possibilities of bodily becoming

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Introduction

This special edition addresses an emerging and vital field of scholarship, which deals with transgender and gender expansive informed education, policy and practice. It is timely and pertinent, especially given that the need to address gender justice in the education system, and specifically transphobia, has been identified as a significant human rights issue, which requires urgent intervention (Greytak, Kosciw, and Diaz 2009; Ullman 2014; Taylor and Peter 2011; Wyss 2004). The primary objective of the proposed special edition is to investigate trans specific education research, policy contexts and practices, with the view to generating knowledge about how the experiences of transgender youth, gender non-conformity and gender creative expression are being addressed in the education system (Blackburn 2007; Cumming-Potvin and Martino 2018; DePalma 2013; Ehrensaft 2016; Luecke 2011; Martino and Cumming-Potvin 2016; Martino et al., *in press*; Ryan, Patraw, and Bednat 2013). Such research is important given, as Green (2010) reports, that (i) 'little is known about the type or frequency of formal education being conducted on gender diverse identities', and (ii) 'there is a significant paucity in the pedagogical literature, both theoretical and practical' in terms of education that deals with addressing transphobia and gender expression in the education system (4). In addition, while there is evidence of trans specific education policies, there is very little detailed or extended analysis of such policies, and limited research that has investigated the effects of these policies, or that has addressed trans-affirmative and gender expansive pedagogical practices in the classroom.

This special edition covers such matters as those pertaining to the enactment of trans affirmative policies across a number of different contexts and educational jurisdictions, providing analytic insights into their specific contingencies and interpretive repertoires governing their enactment and reception. There is also a focus on some empirical research, which attends to how these policies are understood and being taken up in schools, as well that which includes the voices of trans, non-binary and genderqueer youth and scholars that continue to foreground the limits of ensuring gender democratization with respect to washroom/bathroom/toilet access and challenges posed by those seeking gender neutral pronoun recognition. In this respect, the papers included in this special edition are envisaged as making a contribution to the emerging literature in the

field which addresses how questions of trans informed gender justice are being understood, grappled with and enacted (Bartholomaeus and Riggs 2017; Forhard-Dourlent 2018; Human Rights Campaign and Gender Spectrum 2014; Ingrey 2012; Jones 2016; Martino and Cumming-Potvin 2017; Mayo 2017; Meyer and Leonardi 2018; Robinson et al. 2014; Schindel 2008; Sinclair and Gilbert 2018; Smith and Payne 2016; Stiegler 2016; Ullman 2017). However, while acknowledging the necessity of the space that we have opened up for generating trans informed knowledge generation and insights into the enactment of gender democratization at both the policy and practice level, we are conscious of the limits of our efforts. With these limits in mind we want to address some epistemological tensions which we believe may serve as a critical focus for engaging with the field and with the papers that are included as part of this special edition:

The necessity of transgender studies informed understandings of embodiment

While there has been growing and significant research into addressing sexual diversity and schooling (Atkinson and DePalma 2009; Britzman 1998; Epstein 1994; Letts and Sears 1999; Rasmussen 2006; Renold 2005; Robinson 2008), a focus on transgender personhood is only more recently starting to gain much needed attention in the field of education. However, until fairly recently, the 'T' in LGBT studies in education has not received equal attention or has simply been erased in studies employing this acronym (Greytak, Kosciw, and Boesen 2013). In turn, there have been tensions that continue to be generated by queer and feminist engagement with transgender informed understandings of embodiment, which have implications for thinking through the relevance of such debates for generating knowledge about the pedagogical and curricular terms of gender democratization in education systems and schools (Malatino 2015). There is also an emerging and increasing interest in the need to generate informed knowledge and understandings about how transgender, gender diverse, genderqueer and non-binary students are being supported, as well as how more gender complex and creative education is being enacted in school communities (Ehrensaft 2016; Pyne 2014; Rands 2009), especially in light of the proliferation of discourses and representations of transgender and gender diverse people in popular culture and specifically on-line (Horak 2014; Raun 2010).

There is an epistemological need, however, to attend to decolonizing frameworks in education as they pertain specifically to enacting and addressing gender democratization in schools and in the policy domain, particularly with respect to the administration of addressing trans inclusivity that relies on a fundamental discourse of accommodation and liberal notions of human rights (Morgensen 2016; Spade 2011). Concomitant with such an epistemological necessity is also the need for a continued focus on what Stryker (2006) refers to as the politics and ethics of trans 'desubjugation' as 'absolutely essential to critical inquiry' (13). Such a practice involves a committed focus to creating spaces for the embodied experiences and perspectives of transgender, genderqueer and non-binary to be articulated in ways that allow for their diversity to be acknowledged, and which speak to the institutionalization of whiteness in determining which bodies matter in generating trans- and non-binary informed understandings of the limits of settler colonialist understandings of gender diversity with its logics of whitewashing

and erasure of race (Namaste 2009; Snorton and Haritaworn 2013; Stryker and Aizura 2013).

There is also a need, we believe for a necessary focus, epistemologically speaking, with respect to prioritizing transgender studies and the perspectives and insights that it offers us, as scholars working in the field of gender and education (Martino 2016; Namaste 2000; Rubin 1998; Stryker 2006). Such a commitment requires directing necessary attention to the institutionalized regimes of cisnormativity and cisgenderism and their harmful impact, which affect all individuals with respect to the constraints that they pose for embracing more creative and independent gender expansive understandings and practices (Lennon and Mistler 2014; Malatino 2015; Pyne 2014; Serano 2007). In this respect, both ‘minoritizing’ approaches, which attend to transgender and non-binary embodied experiences of livability and ‘and of their relationships to discourses and institutions that act upon and through them’ (Stryker 2006, 13), and ‘universalizing’ approaches, which focus on interrogating ‘the pervasive nature of cisgenderism’ (Lennon and Mistler 2014, 63) and its impact on everyone, need to be considered in tandem as a basis for addressing gender complexity in trans informed policy, research and pedagogical practices (Bartholomaeus and Riggs 2017).¹ As white, middle-class, able-bodied, cisgender scholars we take this necessity for critical engagement with the normalization of the practice of gender assigned at birth and its effects very seriously, while simultaneously being aware of the need to embrace trans desubjugation. In addition and as Spade (2011) points out, such approaches need to be expanded to embrace ‘racial and economic justice-centered trans resistance [as] ... part of this work ... [where] trans people are participants in a range of formations doing this work under many different banners’ (160).

The anti-normative limits of queer theory

However, a sustained engagement with transgender studies also requires some critical consideration of the antinormative limits of queer theory (Wiegman and Wilson 2015) in its capacity to attend to the complexities of embodied understandings and experiences of gender in ontological and phenomenological terms that speak to the realities of gender democratization as it pertains to the politics of recognition, with all of its implications for the livability of trans personhood. As Rubin (1998) points out, the lived experiences of transgender people – what they know about ‘becoming legibly gendered subjects’ (265) – need to be centered in generating trans informed knowledge and understandings, and in this regard, analysis must not just concern itself with ‘cultural inscription’ in terms of the norms governing the surgical demands involving bodily transformation, but attend to the ‘productive, creative work of the subject struggling to articulate itself within received categories’ (266) (see Connell 2012). As Butler (2004) herself points out, ‘categorization has its place and cannot be reduced to forms of anatomical essentialism’:

Similarly, the transsexual desire to become a man or a woman is not to be dismissed as a simple desire to conform to established identity categories. As Kate Bornstein points out, it can be a desire for transformation itself, a pursuit of identity as a transformative exercise, an example of desire itself as a transformative activity. But even if there are, in each of these cases, desires for stable identity at work, it seems crucial to realize that a livable life does require various degrees of stability. In the same way that a life for which there are no categories of recognition exist is not a livable life, so a life for which those categories constitute unlivable constraint is not an acceptable option. (8)

In this respect, Connell (2009) points out that 'gender abolition' as a basis for understanding ontological bodily becoming as 'a strategy of gender democratization' has its limits:

While degendering is a good tactic in many practical situations (for instance those affected by anti-discrimination laws), as an ultimate goal it is extremely pessimistic. For it assumes there is a whole realm of human relations that cannot be democratized, and so must be abolished.

The real alternative to de-gendering, it seems to me, is a strategy of gender democracy. This strategy seeks to equalize gender orders, rather than shrink them to nothing. Conceptually, this assumes that gender does not, in itself, imply inequality. (146)

It is important, therefore, to understand that the study of gender from within the field of transgender studies is not coextensive with that of queer studies with its embrace of an anti-normative logics, or with some branches of feminist studies with an expressed commitment to gender abolition or cisnormative commitment to gender embodiment (Hines 2017; Namaste 2009). In fact, there is evidence that epistemological violence (Teo 2010) has been enacted in the inappropriate use and application of queer theory in imposing a heteronormative lens to make sense of a transgender person's own embodied understanding of their gender identity and personhood (Kaufmann 2010). Such a reliance on a queer antinormative logics as a basis for understanding the materiality of transgender embodiment raises important questions about the epistemological limits of queer theory, with its emphasis on a deconstructive analytics that fails to account for and do justice to an understanding, phenomenologically speaking, of trans bodily ontological understandings, which 'recognizes the circumscribed agency of embodied subjects who mobilize around their body image to sustain their life projects' (Rubin 1998, 271).

While we do not believe that it is productive to pit transgender studies against queer or feminist studies, we believe that it is important to be cognizant of the epistemological bases for grounding and fostering an understanding of gender democratization associated with these differing theoretical accounts of gender embodiment, gender becoming and gender fluidity (see Elliot 2016). Such a critical engagement necessitates attending to questions of gender embodiment, visibility and recognition that are cognizant of the ontological and phenomenological integrity of the diversity of trans and non-binary people's experiences and own understandings of 'bodily becoming' as they pertain to the realization of their personhood (Doan 2010; Lane 2009; Nordmarken 2014). In this ethical and political regard, it also requires attending to the erasure of intersex individuals with its implications for addressing and furthering our understanding of gender complexity and sexed embodiment with respect to the conduct of education research, policy-making and curricular practices in education institutions such as schools. As Feder (2014) asserts, there is a need for a concomitant shift in

our focus from the bodies of those born with atypical sex anatomies, which have been the privileged objects of attention both in medical practice and in criticisms of it, and moves us to consider instead the bodies of those whose responses constitute the motivating force for normalizing practices in the first place. (16)

Once again it is this *universalizing* focus on gender normativity with a focus on those who enforce such regimes of truth, while not forgetting the *minoritized* focus on the agency and self-determination of intersex people themselves (IGLYO 2016).

Concluding thoughts

We share these ruminations on the epistemological and ethical implications of a need for engagement with transgender studies as a basis for thinking and rethinking the terms of policy analysis, research and practice in educational institutions that are committed to fostering transgender informed and gender expansive understandings of embodiment as they are reflected in the papers included as part of this special edition. We find such critical engagement important in our work in the field of gender and education because it forces us to confront fundamental erasures and limits that are necessary in generating more informed understandings of gender complexity and sexed embodiment that speak to a *trans and intersex resistance reform agenda* 'that centralizes race, indigeneity, poverty, immigration, and disability analysis' (Spade 2011, 17).

Note

1. This idea of *minoritorizing* and *universalizing* approaches is based on our reading of Sedgwick (1993/1999).

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