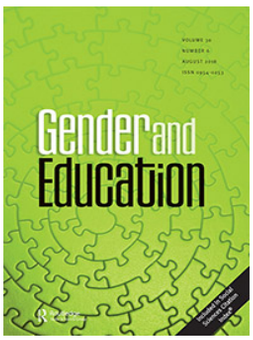

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The de/politicization of pronouns: implications of the No Big Deal Campaign for gender-expansive educational policy and practice

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ABSTRACT

Accommodating non-binary transgender people, many of whom use gender-neutral pronouns, poses a unique challenge to schools and universities, even in contexts with legal protections for transgender rights. This article explores a recent Canadian controversy around gender-neutral pronouns, and assembles a theoretical framework to analyze the argument that legal protection for transgender peoples' pronouns poses a threat to 'free speech.' The framework bridges queer theory, affect theory and Deleuzo-Guattarian assemblage theory to propose a threshold between 'extra' and 'excessive' effort to accommodate social difference in everyday life. Free speech objections produce some peoples' pronouns as requiring 'excessive' effort. This extra/excessive framework was exemplified by a recent Canadian social media campaign that sought to produce transgender peoples' pronouns as requiring merely 'extra' effort, which entails de-politicizing pronouns. Community responses to the campaign carry significant implications for gender-expansive educational policy and practice.

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Introduction

In the fall of 2016, gender-neutral pronouns (GNP) erupted into Anglophone Canadian[1] public life as part of a controversy regarding the rights of people who are transgender: whose gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth. A range of gender-neutral 'neo-pronouns' or new pronouns such as ze (in place of she/her) and hir (in place of he/him) has emerged in North American transgender communities, although many GNP users opt for singular they/them as a personal pronoun. In everyday speech, this entails re-purposing a Standard English convention – using 'they' to refer to a hypothetical stranger – for a different purpose: referring to a *known* person whose gender identity is in some way non-binary, or other than man or woman. While there is general consensus among linguists that singular they is grammatically correct (Bodine 1975; Haegeman 1981; LaScotte 2016; Matossian 1997; Newman 1992), using 'they' to index non-binary gender is a recent development in Standard English and is in process

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(see Bjorkman 2017). Regardless, singular they was selected by the American Dialect Association as the 2015 Word of the Year. At the time of submission, major daily newspapers *The Globe and Mail* (Canada) and *The Washington Post* (United States) have added singular they to their style guides. However, the emergence of gender-neutral pronouns in common usage does not alter a simple fact: that changing the pronouns we use for another person or using a familiar pronoun in a new way entails practicing, making mistakes, and receiving correction. In short, it takes effort. It is how this effort is felt and discursively produced as extra or excessive which I take to be the actual battleground of the Canadian controversy at the centre of this article.

In what follows, I explore the micropolitics of gender-neutral pronoun usage and user experiences, or, the negotiation of gender-neutral pronouns in everyday interaction, with particular relevance to educational institutions. I argue that being asked to use singular they for a known person reveals a threshold between 'extra' effort to accommodate social difference, which is felt to be unremarkable, and 'excessive' effort, which is felt to lie beyond the scope of the social contract and therefore cannot be legitimately demanded of one. I argue that using singular they for a known person does indeed require extra effort, at least at first, and I identify 'excessiveness' as a tactic deployed against efforts to secure accommodations for transgender people, whether in law, in policy or in everyday life. To further illustrate extra and excessive effort in relation to pronouns, I describe a response to the above controversy: the No Big Deal Campaign or NBD (www.nbdcampaign.ca). NBD is a tactical mobilization of extra/excessive theory, and I illustrate how the Campaign's initial reception within a predominantly transgender and queer social media network leads to some difficult questions for gender-expansive policy and practice in educational institutions.

A brief review of the relevant literature

First, it is important to note that there is no published empirical scholarship on the precise topic of this article: the micropolitical negotiation of GNP in everyday interactions, within and outside of education. That said, in addition to the above-cited linguistic scholarship, there is an emerging transdisciplinary literature (see Barker and Richards 2015; Beemyn 2015; Beemyn and Rankin 2011; Davidson 2016; Frohard-Dourlent et al. 2017; Lewis 2017; Nicolazzo 2016; Oakley 2016; Rankin and Beemyn 2012; Richards, Bouman, and Barker 2017) on the experiences of people who are non-binary, many of whom use gender-neutral pronouns. While there is no large-scale data to support this claim – and it is debatable whether this could be substantiated in any quantifiable way given the heterogeneity of transgender-spectrum people (see Edkins et al. 2016; Scheim and Bauer 2015) – it can be assumed that most GNP users do identify somewhere under the transgender umbrella, regardless of whether they are visually androgynous (a common assumption). Some use 'non-binary' (with or without the hyphen) as a gender identity term whereas others may use genderqueer (see Richards, Bouman, and Barker 2017), agender (see Miller 2016), or other terms. In a landmark survey of 433 transgender people in the Canadian province of Ontario, Scheim and Bauer (2015) found that 'a sizeable proportion of respondents' – an estimated 27% of those assigned male at birth and 14% of those assigned female at birth – 'endorsed only nonbinary gender identities (e.g. genderqueer, bigender, Two-Spirit)' on the questionnaire (6). In 2017, a UK-based non-

academic online survey of 9,932 people (worldwide, but likely dominated by Anglophone respondents – see Note 1) who self-identify as 'not fully included in the binary of "anyone whose gender is always entirely and solely male, and anyone whose gender is always entirely and solely female"' (The Gender Census, 2017, n. p.) found that 66% reported using the term 'nonbinary' and 81% preferred singular they as a pronoun.

Within a combined survey and interview study focused on transgender peoples' identity development over the lifecourse, Beemyn and Rankin's (2011) sample of 14 genderqueer-identified interview participants was 'substantially younger overall than the other transgender people surveyed' (153). From this finding and other research, Beemyn and Rankin suggest that 'the use of terms like "genderqueer" reflects a growing understanding among individuals who are now coming out as transgender that gender is not a binary concept' (146–147). That said, Frohard-Dourlent et al. (2017) note that while 'non-binary gender identities seem to resonate with younger people … they are neither new nor simply a youth phenomenon' (2). Rather,

> the 'existence of both contemporary and historical terms such as androgyne, agender, genderqueer, genderfluid, Two-Spirit and pangender, in historical records, academic literature, popular culture and our own research, confirms that non-binary identities have indeed existed in different forms for decades and even centuries. (3)

While many non-binary people do use a GNP, there is insufficient overlap for the literature on non-binary peoples' experiences to stand in for literature on GNP user experiences, or on everyday GNP negotiation. For example, in an online survey of 557 American transgender-identified students, Wentling (2015) found that less than half of respondents who identified outside of the male/female binary reported using a GNP. Furthermore, it is anecdotally apparent that some men and women – whether transgender or not –use a GNP, for various reasons. This emergent de-coupling of pronouns and gender identities problematizes the simple deduction of pronouns based on gender expression alone. To this end, explicit invitations to share one's pronoun are becoming more common in educational and other institutional spaces. Social sciences and humanities conferences are broadly beginning feature name tags with a space for one's pronoun, and stylized pronoun stickers can be ordered which attendees can affix to their name tags (see http://www.pronounribbons.org). There are also many community-produced resources on how and when to ask an individual for their pronoun or negotiate gender pronouns in various settings and situations (e.g. GLSEN, n.d.; https://www.mypronouns.org; www.theyismypronoun.com). Some formal pronoun sharing structures are emerging in higher education (see Brauer 2017) and community settings, including the 'pronoun go-round' in which people introduce themselves by sharing their pronouns and preferred names.

To conclude this brief literature review, I will reiterate my prior claim that there is a substantial literature adjacent to the topic of this article,[2] but no scholarly literature in English on the micropolitical negotiation of GNP in everyday interactions. In the next section, I flesh out the article's theoretical framework.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework structuring my elucidation of extra vs. excessive effort bridges queer theory, affect theory, and Deleuzo-Guattarian (Deleuze and Guattari 1987)

assemblage theory. I use queer theory writings on normativity (Butler 1993a, 1993b; Cohen 1997; Rubin 1993; Warner 2000; Wiegman and Jagose 2015; see also Airton 2013) to think about how gender and sexuality are continually re-produced and their production rendered invisible through processes of normalization whereby some things (e.g. the heterosexual matrix of sex-gender-sexuality) become normative – unremarkable and unremarked-upon – whereas other things (i.e. that rupture the heterosexual matrix) become non-normative: hyper-visible objects of conscious thought and action. Critically, and following Wiegman and Jagose (2015), my use of queer theory does not assign any tacit badness to the normative or tacit goodness to the non- or anti-normative; rather, my theory of extra vs. excessive effort looks to the effects (and affects, below) of normalization in the case of GNP. I do not ascribe any tacit radical potential to GNP, but am interested instead in what the conflict over their normalization produces and in what normalization might offer to (or take away from) GNP users. I use affect theory (Berlant 2011; Massumi 2002; Stewart 2007) to think about the micropolitics of normalization, or how this process plays out in everyday life as a site of considerable affective intensity which can feel to the subject like discomfort or anger.

Following Massumi (2002) and others, however, I disconnect affect from the feelings of a self-knowing subject who can articulate 'my feelings' (e.g. discomfort or anger, as above). Rather, after Massumi, I use affect to mean autonomous, circulating intensities that fleetingly touch down on our bodies regardless of whether we take notice and let alone whether we come to narrate this touching-down as, for example, 'my discomfort.' These fleeting intensities index our non-sovereignty (Berlant 2011) as an effect of being continually caught up in assemblages (Bell 2006; DeLanda 2006; Deleuze and Guattari 1987), or ever-shifting supra-individual networks of relations among different components, that both affect and are affected by the actions of components (including human subjects). Within this framework, what 'I' do and why are not wholly explained by my conscious intent or by the values I hold; rather, I affect or am affected by others because I am part of assemblages: things that include *and* exceed me, and which act in the world in their own right. In this way, affect can teach us in real-time about everyday life in a networked social world without relying on what the conscious, sovereign subject can say about their experiences (Airton 2014; Niccolini 2016).

I will provide a brief illustration of this theoretical framework: how the thresholds of 'public space' and 'private space' assemblages emerge into sensation on a public bus. I can participate in rigidifying norms around 'public space' without my intent and even without my knowledge by, for example, doing a double-take and/or staring at a couple on the bus engaged in 'sexual behaviour.' Before I can notice myself noticing, I am caught up and affecting others as a component in many overlapping assemblages, including 'public space' but also 'heterosexuality' and 'public transit,' both of which are co-produced with 'public space.' As one component in the public space assemblage, I exercise capacities which help to maintain its identifiability as 'public space' and not something else instead: the private, the sexual. My body's capacities of expressivity and movement are activated in the service of *this particular* 'public space:' a local assemblage (re)produced as components activate our capacities in a patterned rhythm.

'Public space' is not given and static, but is produced again and again by patterns of actions we do *not* do, like 'sexual behaviour' (the content being contextually-specific), and by actions we *do*, like sitting quietly, staring at our phones or a book or advertisements

or nothing in particular (which is difficult to sustain), or moving about only when our stop is announced. 'Sexual behaviour' on the bus is an event that produces an intensive threshold between the assemblages 'public space' and 'private space.' In 'my' double-take at the couple, too fast for conscious thought, or 'my' staring before I realize I am doing so, my body is activated by the intensification of the threshold, caught up in the service of keeping the assemblage homogeneous: we do these things, in this space, at this time, but not those things, or else 'public space' could fall apart and become something else. My sovereign beliefs about sexuality are irrelevant, except as sources of anxiety once (if) I realize 'what I have done:' unwittingly participated in normalization, which may run against my values. Actually, 'something has been done' and not by any one 'I' in particular with a sovereign, self-conscious rationale.

Within the theoretical framework I have described and illustrated here, assemblage thresholds are sensate boundaries between the normative and the non-normative, which are neared and sometimes breached in everyday social interaction, whether 'I' notice or not. Components whose capacities get caught up in the service of assemblage threshold maintenance are agents of normalization. That is, *we are*. At the dynamic threshold between the normative and the non-normative, bodies are caught up, participating in sighs, shrugs, eye-rolls, laughter, shared glances, checking our phones, and/or avoiding eye contact, among many other less-than-conscious things. Too quick to be the result of deliberative reasoning, they are nonetheless labours to produce and stabilize a threshold between the normative and the non-normative: to make something or someone 'not normal' and available for sanction in the service of stabilizing a local norm. My theoretical framework suggests that loosening norms – what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) might describe as smoothing striated lines in particularly rigid assemblages – can be an objective of action and pedagogy, however implicitly and indirectly (see Airton 2014). This is effectively harnessing ambient processes of normalization in the service of doing less micropolitical harm to social difference, recalling my assertion above that normalization – in my rendering – is neither good nor bad.

Extra versus excessive effort

The theory of extra vs. excessive effort rests on the idea that we are able – if only belatedly – to recognize that we have been caught up in processes of normalization-as-threshold-production. Once affective intensity has receded and we are no longer seized by it (Massumi 2002), we are left to cope with the sensory memory of having been outside of ourselves and our self-control. This coping may proceed via *narration*, or the production and repetition of explanations that serve to naturalize our participation and banish its palpable awkwardness. Narration does not necessarily mean that we 'tell a story' about our involvement to someone else, although depending on the degree to which the event threatened a rupture of a local assemblage threshold and to what degree we were unwittingly activated as components in its defense, we may feel a need to do just that. How I narrate away the lingering, unsettling sensations of my non-sovereignty depends on my investment in being sovereign. If I hold myself to be on the side of what is 'right' then I am likely to narrate affective intensity as *my* righteous rage or indignation at immutable social goods being threatened by an event (like adults engaging in 'sexual behaviour' in broad daylight on the bus). In this reading, I was not 'out of

control' and caught up in something larger than myself (assemblage); rather, my beliefs are so deeply rooted on something so essentially right that my non-sovereign responses are reflections of the rightness of my beliefs. Conversely, if I hold my beliefs to be but some among many in a pluralistic array, I am more apt to narrate the affective intensity that carried me away as an invitation to reflect and be curious about what just happened. Where did I go, and what did I do?

I suggest that situations in which we notice that are called to 'accommodate' the difference of the other are situations in which *we have had to become conscious of behaviour – in ourselves or others – that we usually do not notice*. It is not that we were not 'accommodating' others before (we were), but that the unremarkable character of everyday life has been interrupted; things have become intensive because a threshold between the normative and the non-normative has emerged into sensation. We want affective intensity to recede because it is consciously experienced as awkwardness, as anxiety. We crave the seamlessness of an affective equilibrium state where things are humming along in the flow (Ahmed 2012): what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) might refer to as a plateau. And yet, we are made to dwell in the awkwardness produced by non-normativity and manage this emerging threshold in what could otherwise have been a perfectly forgettable moment in time: *why can't I just call you 'she' and get on with my life? You look like a 'she' and I have other things to do. I don't want to have to think about this*.

Within this framework, the narration of *extra effort* or *excessive effort* is one means with which the subject seeks to recover from affective intensity and its threat to sovereignty. *Extra effort* is labour that is felt to be unremarkable and justifiable by the subject, and *excessive effort* is labour that is felt to be remarkable and unjustifiable by the subject. The distinction rests on whether I can narrate a demand for effort as an unjust demand on my time and energy, and whether my narration will normalize my own refusal to meet the demand. If yes, the effort is 'excessive' and I receive no sanction for non-accommodation; indeed, if I am successful, the sanction itself and not my refusal become the event of 'injustice,' for example. If I cannot narrate a demand as unjust, the requisite effort is merely 'extra' and I am liable to receive a sanction that others find justifiable.

Crucially, extra effort and excessive effort to accommodate social difference do not actually differ in terms of the action(s) they entail, such as using a person's correct gender pronoun. Rather, it is the felt legitimacy of both demand and sanction that makes these efforts different, and which makes a person accountable (or not) to the demand, to the demander, and to other persons conceivably like the demander (whether or not I will ever encounter such persons going forward). This is where the narration of a demand as requiring 'excessive' effort becomes a powerful political tactic: people can refuse to answer the demand without facing whatever sanction locally accrues to non-normative behaviour. In the next section, I explore the deployment of this tactic by analyzing the events I have alluded to throughout.

Gender-neutral pronouns in the news: backlash against legal protections in Canada

In October 2016, University of Toronto psychology professor Jordan Peterson (2016) posted a YouTube video that went viral, in which he outlined his concerns about a proposed piece of Canadian federal legislation: *Bill C-16 – An Act to amend the Canadian*

Human Rights Act and the Criminal Code (S.C. 2017, c. 13). C-16 would add the terms 'gender identity' and 'gender expression' to the *Canadian Human Rights Act* (R.S.C., 1985, c. H-6) and to the hate crimes provisions of the criminal code (R.S.C. 1985, c. C-46, as amended). C-16 would prohibit discrimination on both grounds, and instruct judges to consider whether a crime was hate-motivated due to a victim's gender identity or gender expression. Advocating hatred or genocide on these grounds would also be criminalized.

By that time, almost every Canadian province and territory had added gender identity and/or gender expression to its human rights legislation. In Ontario, for example, *Bill 33, Toby's Act (Right to be Free from Discrimination and Harassment Because of Gender Identity or Gender Expression)* had become law in 2012, adding gender identity *and* gender expression to the *Ontario Human Rights Code* (RSO 1990, c. H.19) and prohibiting discrimination on these grounds in provincially-mandated domains like education. C-16 would add protections to *federally*-mandated domains such as transportation, banking and telecommunications. When Peterson (2016) released his YouTube video, C-16 was being debated by the Canadian federal parliament. It would eventually become the law of the land in June 2017 (see Cossman and Katri 2017 for a more detailed account of C-16's germination and process).

In his video, Peterson (2016) outlined his objections to Bill C-16. He critiqued a policy (Ontario Human Rights Commission [OHRC] 2014) authored by the OHRC that guides the implementation of *Toby's Act* (the provincial C-16 equivalent) in Ontario and is affiliated with the tribunal that hears allegations of discrimination. In the absence of legal interpretation of *Toby's Act* from tribunal decisions, the OHRC offers provisional definitions of gender expression and gender identity to guide institutional policy. While careful to claim that its definitions are offered for guidance only, the OHRC defines these terms as follows:

> *Gender identity* is each person's internal and individual experience of gender. It is their sense of being a woman, a man, both, neither, or anywhere along the gender spectrum. A person's gender identity may be the same as or different from their birth-assigned sex. … *Gender expression* is how a person publicly presents their gender. This can include behaviour and outward appearance such as dress, hair, make-up, body language and voice. *A person's chosen name and pronoun are also common ways of expressing gender*. (3; added emphasis)

This guidance appears to have been accepted, and the OHRC definitions are found in the anti-discrimination policies of institutions across Ontario, including schools, school boards and universities (e.g. Humber College Institute of Technology and Advanced Learning 2015; Toronto District School Board Gender-Based Violence Prevention Office 2013). For Peterson (2016), Ontario's *Toby's Act* and the OHRC definitions were a harbinger of things to come federally in Canada when Bill C-16 became law.

Peterson's (2016) central claim, introduced in this video and repeated in many other places since, was that Bill C-16's legal protection of gender pronouns amounts to 'compelled speech,' and therefore risks violating the right to freedom of expression enshrined in the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. In other words, making institutions responsible for providing an environment in which every person can have their correct pronouns used is effectively compelling people to say particular words. Whereas the state already requires one to *refrain from saying* some things in public life, Peterson implied that

pronoun protections would require one *to say* things with which one disagrees, under threat of sanction. Could a person lose their job or be sent to prison because they use the wrong pronoun for someone, whether by mistake or because their beliefs about gender (my wording) exclude transgender people? If someone is compelled to say these words, so it goes, what other speech could be compelled down the road? In protest, Peterson – who teaches at the University of Toronto – has declared his intention to not use a student's gender-neutral pronoun if asked to do so.

The anatomy of an 'excessive effort' claim

In this section, I read Peterson's (2016) signature argument against legal pronoun protections through my theorization of extra and excessive effort. Pivotally, a refrain of Peterson and other C-16 critics is that they are not hostile toward transgender people but driven by concern for free speech. On the record (in the debate referenced below), Peterson has made this claim and stated that there are transgender people for whom he *would* use the correct pronoun, where 'correct' in my usage means the pronoun used by the transgender person themself. I now explore the conditions under which Peterson would apparently cease his refusal, or, in which using someone's gender pronoun would be felt by him to require no more than extra effort.

Peterson further elaborated his free speech objection in an October 2016 televised debate on *The Agenda with Steve Paikin*, TV Ontario's current affairs programme. Peterson participated in the debate alongside a transgender woman – libertarian student organizer Theryn Meyer – who agreed with his position, and opposed a group of transgender advocates. Host Paikin asked Peterson what he is willing to endure for his refusal to use a student's gender-neutral pronoun, to which Peterson replied:

> I think that the Ontario Human Rights Tribunal is probably obligated by their own tangled web to bring me in front of it. If they fine me I won't pay it. If they put me in jail I'll go on a hunger strike. I'm not doing this. And that's that. I'm not using the words that other people require me to use, especially if they're made up by radical left-wing ideologues. Now, if our society comes to some sort of consensus over the next while about how will we solve the pronoun problem, let's call it, and that becomes part of popular parlance and it seems to solve the problem properly without sacrificing the distinction between singular and plural and without requiring me to memorize an impossible list of an indefinite number of pronouns then I would be willing to reconsider my position. But I'm also partly opposed to this because it's being made mandatory and has the whole weight of the law behind it. (n. p.)

In what follows, I analyze each of Peterson's conditions (isolated from the TVO debate quotation above) through my framework of extra vs. excessive effort, bearing in mind that the action would remain the same: he would still be using a transgender person's pronoun regardless of whether the required effort can be narrated as extra or excessive.

First, Peterson will use a transgender person's pronoun if it is his choice, which is his foundational objection to Bill C-16 and any threat of sanction. However, he *has* chosen to use transgender peoples' pronouns, on the record, and in Ontario where as a public employee he is subject to *Toby's Act* i.e. where he is conceivably compelled by law to do so. In the debate, Peterson affirmed that he would use 'she/her' to refer to fellow guest Theryn Meyer, a feminine-presenting (and out) transgender woman. One may assume that he would do the same for a masculine-presenting (and out) transgender

man. In this sketch, where both people are known by Peterson to be transgender and are making a demand on him to use their pronouns, the demand is an unremarkable and unremarked-upon experience producing no sensation of awkwardness and anxiety, and requiring no self-recovery through narration. It is not felt as excessive.

Similarly, Peterson states that he will (choose to) use a transgender person's pronoun if that person's 'pronoun preference' is personal and not ideological, where 'ideological' functions as narrative shorthand for the threshold beyond which 'excessive' effort is required to use their pronoun. In determining the reason for a person's pronoun so that one can freely choose whether to say it, however, one usually only has access to how that person looks, sounds and behaves; these are all components of gender expression (OHRC 2014). It is unclear what a resolutely 'non-ideological' preference might look like in the moment of determining whether a pronoun attribution would be the product of one's free choice. This echoes a common demand on transgender people that they 'pass' as normatively-feminine cis-gender women or normatively-masculine cis-gender men, or, express gender in ways that do not markedly disturb binary gender categories (see Spade 2006). In actuality, the position 'I will (choose to) use a transgender person's pronoun if that person's pronoun preference is personal and not ideological' becomes 'I will use a transgender person's pronoun if their gender expression is binary and gender-normative.' If that person's gender is visually non-binary or if they do not conform to cis-normative standards of femininity or masculinity, for Peterson the pronoun demand becomes a demand for excessive effort. In this instance, he will exercise free choice and refuse. The extent to which he does *not* notice himself applying a pronoun equals the extent to which he finds himself to have freely chosen to do so. Ironically, *no* deliberation is held as evidence that deliberation has occurred.

In sum, the free speech objection tacitly produces the effort required to use *some* peoples' pronouns as excessive. This in turn produces using *some* pronoun demands as demands to be refused without sanction. Any sanction then becomes the injustice, and not the refusal to use a person's pronoun. Although proponents of the free speech objection tend to claim their concerns are unrelated to gender – i.e. 'I support transgender people, but I'm worried about free speech' – I have endeavoured to show that producing the effort required to use some pronouns as excessive is making a claim about gender. 'Compelled speech' describes an encounter in which one notices one's self doing something one usually does without noticing: choosing which pronoun to say. To notice is to find one's self taking notice; to fight for one's right not to notice is to fight against others deviating from gender norms, which is when we take notice. Viewed through the lens of extra vs. excessive effort, then, the free speech argument against pronoun protections is revealed as an argument that people should express gender only in limited ways; otherwise, the requisite effort to meet their needs is excessive, and therefore unjustifiable.

Knowledge about transgender people remains sparse among the general Canadian public, and it can be difficult to make a purely logical case for why transgender people need our pronouns to be used. Logic was also only debatably at issue during the controversy around Bill C-16 and its purported extension of legal protections to gender pronouns, given the intensification produced by the controversy itself. For example, a common refrain in media and social media commentary was that, under Bill C-16, one could be sent to jail for saying the wrong pronoun, even accidentally. Scholars (e.g.

Kirkup 2017) widely appeared in the Canadian media to correct this grave misunderstanding of the law: that no one can be sent to jail for a simple pronoun mistake. Nevertheless, this misunderstanding was repeated and, through repetition, elevated to the status of evidence that 'free speech' (i.e. only using the pronoun one would apply without noticing that one was applying a pronoun, as above) was being threatened with incarceration. 'Free speech' argumentation proved attractive to many, from columnists in national newspapers (e.g. Blatchford 2016; Wente 2016) to (albeit anecdotally) ordinary people in conversation. Transgender-friendly moderates – urban, educated and liberal Canadians who are likely to have (knowingly) interacted with transgender people – began to deploy Peterson's free speech argumentation against pronoun protections.

The No Big Deal Campaign: de-politicizing pronouns?

'Free speech' claims carry an apolitical quality and tend to circulate as generic social goods. Insisting on the primacy of 'free speech' in mainstream discourse is an effortless, low-intensity proposition; by contrast, any claim that 'we should not have free speech' is non-normative and remarkable. Recalling my theoretical framework such an utterance is vulnerable to social sanction because the 'free speech' assemblage overlaps with other assemblages (Bell 2006; DeLanda 2006; Deleuze and Guattari 1987): democracy, Canadianness, and tolerance. By contrast, using someone's gender-neutral pronoun, using someone's (visually) unlikely she/her or he/him pronoun, or changing pronouns for someone is not effortless. It is intensive. It can be a demand to make an effort without understanding why: to think, practice and be corrected about the pronouns we apply to others. It can feel like too much to ask: to see *that* body, but say *those* words. It feels like too much because in this instance, using a person's correct gender pronoun does not feel like doing nothing; it takes effort. If the required effort is narrated as excessive, such that the demand itself becomes an injustice (in this case, to 'free speech'), then the refusing party may follow the effortless, seductive path of recovery via free speech argumentation.

When Peterson (2016) released his initial video, I was an adjunct lecturer in education at the University of Toronto, where he is a full professor of psychology. The release of Peterson's video led to a series of campus clashes between, on the one hand, transgender students and allies, and on the other, students nominally concerned about 'free speech' who supported Peterson (Denton 2016). As a non-binary person and singular they/them user who was out as such in my own faculty and across campus, I was deeply troubled by the sudden intensification of my pronouns on campus and in the media, and the effects of this intensification on other transgender students, faculty and staff.

Six weeks after the video's release, I launched a campaign in response to the conflict, with funding from several on- and off-campus organizations. The No Big Deal Campaign (or NBD – see www.nbdcampaign.ca) targets effort – both sensation and narration – as the *actual* issue at stake in the pronoun controversy, not 'free speech.' With its spring green social media badge (Figure 1), NBD produces the act of using a transgender person's pronoun as requiring *extra* effort, not *excessive* effort: something unremarkable about which one can say 'nbd.' With its accessible infographics (e.g. Figure 2), NBD produces even the act of speaking back to erroneous arguments against using transgender peoples' pronouns as a site of merely extra effort. NBD's layout and illustrations were created by Cai Sepulis, a graphic designer whose illustrations are commonly found on

Figure 1. The No Big Deal Campaign badge.

craft beer cans and music festival signage: brands whose adherents are progressive urban Canadian millennials. Both badge and infographics are freely available online under a Creative Commons License, and NBD continues to circulate online at the time of writing. Offline, NBD buttons, stickers, magnets, posters, and door signs have been made and displayed across North America.

The NBD badge shares well on social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr, and with its minimal text is designed to circulate as seamlessly as possible, rather than slow down by becoming remarkable and remarked-upon. This idea of seamless

Figure 2. An infographic from the No Big Deal Campaign.

circulation echoes Ahmed's (2012) study of university diversity policies which, she found, tend to circulate seamlessly because they do little. In fact, circulation might be all they do. Whereas diversity policies are expected to do much, however, posting the NBD badge online or in print merely declares one's 'okay-ness' with using anyone's pronoun and, colloquially, not making 'a big deal' about it. NBD positions badge-posting and therefore pronoun support as *not* a political commitment worthy of notice, but an ordinary outlay of (extra) effort. In case a person's badge-posting is read as political, or if a poster chooses to speak back to 'free speech' or other arguments against Bill C-16, we also created a series of infographics with text contributed by academic experts in law, philosophy and rhetoric, For example, Figure 2 corrects the misunderstanding that C-16 would send one to jail for saying the wrong pronoun. Like Figure 2, each of the infographics re-states an opposing argument, suggests a brief rejoinder, and states the scholarly reasoning behind the rejoinder, intentionally de-emphasized in smaller print. Crucially, a person need not access the smaller print to use the rejoinder. Along with the content, then, the format also seeks to produce 'supporting transgender people' as requiring merely extra effort.

Pivotally, NBD aims to provide a technology of narrative relief from the inevitable friction of having to notice one's self noticing pronouns. This is an alternative technology to the seamlessness of 'free speech' argumentation, which is less intensive than actively arguing against transgender peoples' right to have our pronouns used. 'Free speech' argumentation and 'NBD' can be understood to serve the same end: dialling down affective intensity so that one can move on. Under 'free speech' logic, one is 'cribbing' a normative intellectual claim and moving on without vigourous argumentation. Similarly, under NBD logic, one can also move on without intensive argumentation because 'it's nbd!' Therefore, NBD micropolitically intervenes in the narration of effort in order to produce 'using a person's unfamiliar or (to some) unlikely pronoun' and 'free speech' (or other normative argument) as similarly intensive.

I originally circulated the NBD badge, along with an open invitation to the Campaign's launch on December 1st 2017, within my own local social media network consisting mainly of queer and/or transgender people with deep knowledge and political commitments related to gender and sexual diversity. In other words, people in this network are generally not NBD's target *audience* (people being called on to use transgender peoples' pronouns, perhaps for the first time), but NBD's end *beneficiaries*: people who need others to expend extra effort use their pronouns, and confirmed allies. Upon its initial Facebook release, the *original* badge (Figure 3) received immediate criticism due to the stated perception that 'your pronoun, no big deal' could be used to de-legitimize transgender peoples' pronoun needs by normalizing the dismissal of a pronoun request or correction and not the pronouns themselves. While the badge is designed to travel as seamlessly as possible in order to produce pronoun support as a depoliticized expenditure of (extra) effort, as above, the original badge was perhaps too slippery. Its slipperiness made it get stuck in social media circulation; it stopped going anywhere (being shared) because it did not stand still enough to be a stance. Figure 1 – '*I'll Use* Your Pronoun, No Big Deal' – is actually the second and modified version of the NBD badge, which I released on Facebook within twenty-four hours of releasing the original (Figure 3), which merely read 'Your Pronoun, No Big Deal.' I shared the modified badge (Figure 1) within the same social media network, along with a note to the effect that

Figure 3. The original version of the NBD badge, before 'I'll use' was added.

concerns shared on Facebook inspired the 'I'll Use' modification. Sharing then commenced apace, sometimes with qualifying text (i.e. stating why a poster had now changed their stance on NBD). While some continued to object to what they saw as the Campaign's trivialization of pronouns, these objections were no longer sticky enough to prevent the badge from circulating, and it accrued likes and shares.

While the addition of 'I' to the second badge – '*I'll* Use Your Pronoun, No Big Deal' – almost instantly enabled its circulation, I argue that the addition may have also undercut NBD's mobilization of de-politicized extra effort tactics by requiring a badge-poster to step into a conscious subject position and articulate a political stance. Arguably, the badge's initial too-slipperiness produced this one action – re-posting the badge – in support of transgender peoples' pronouns as requiring too little (extra) effort, which intensified and rigidified the thresholds of what we might call a 'transgender activism assemblage.' For example, without naming NBD directly, one critic Tweeted that the Campaign was 'cis-washing' the institution because it bore the logo of one unit of the University of Toronto where Peterson remains an employee. 'Cis-washing' is an adaptation of 'pink-washing,' a pejorative applied to deployments of 'gay-friendliness' for the economic or political benefit of institutions or nation-states but with little tangible benefit for the most marginalized LGBTQ+ people (see essays in Dryden and Lenon 2015). A threshold: NBD was depoliticized enough to be worn by the University of Toronto, widely seen to be treating Peterson with kid gloves due to a perceived overlap of 'free speech' and academic freedom. Supporting NBD did not make the University expend enough (or the right kind of) effort.

I argue that modifications to the NBD badge eased its circulation by requiring posters to perform a political stance: a condition of circulation within this network, which as above is not populated by NBD's intended audience of non-specialist, largely cis-gender allies in waiting (how the Campaign positions the public). This gets to the role of the subject in what I termed 'transgender activism assemblages,' which extend into the field of education (more below): who the subject of activism is, and how that subject is constructed as robust, static, highly identified and identifiable, and very sovereign. Demands for this sort of subject featured prominently among the critiques of the original (Figure 3) badge on social media: *who is NBD?* In conversations on Facebook, people I knew came forward and cobbled together terms – transgender, community member, non-binary – into a good-enough composite of me (NBD's founder) as if knowing 'who' NBD was

might make the original badge become unstuck: make re-posting it less intensive within this network of beneficiaries. The implicit question of 'who *isn't* NBD?' also emerged, including as an explicit demand by one (self-identifying as) white critic: *which Black and Indigenous trans women were consulted on the campaign?* While recognizing its legitimacy, we can wonder at the threshold galvanized by this demand in particular: what would this 'roll call' do?

Furthermore, this demand for subjects produced my own hasty response in which I further nailed down (Massumi 2002) the 'who' of NBD, perhaps further curbing its seamless circulation. My Facebook post launching the original badge ('Your Pronoun, No Big Deal' at Figure 3) contained no references to myself at all; however, in the later post announcing the modified badge ('I'll Use Your Pronoun, No Big Deal' at Figure 1), I explicitly stated that I am a transgender and non-binary person, and that my pronoun *is* in fact a very big deal, to me. In my remarks at the Campaign launch (text archived on www.theyismypronoun.com) I also told a story of myself as a suffering gender non-conforming child, continually outed by my assigned pronoun whenever I laboured to live a non-girl life:

> My pronoun is a very big deal, to me. It's taken me a long time to find it. I was a kid when strangers first used a pronoun to tell me who I was, and what I was allowed to do. They thought they knew something about me just because they suddenly heard other people refer to me with a word. And that word would take away my freedom of choice: to decide how I'd spend my recess, how I got to play, with what and with whom. It took away my freedom to spend my time and energy on play rather than passing as the boy that I didn't want to be either.

Like others, I was caught up in these unfolding events at the threshold of a local 'transgender activism' assemblage, responding with this narrative of myself as quickly as possible. I did so despite the fact that my own published scholarship on gender and sexual diversity in education (Airton 2009, 2013), along with the work of others (see Gilbert 2014; Talburt and Rasmussen 2010), troubles the invocation of suffering queer and/or transgender subjects as a rationale for doing gender and sexual diversity work in institutions, on the grounds that a focus on queer and/or transgender suffering restricts what this work can entail: something for those and only 'those kids.' And yet, I was unable to withstand the intensification at the assemblage threshold which had been produced by the original too-slippery NBD badge ('Your Pronoun, No Big Deal'): an intensification dialed down by the invocation of myself as a particular kind of (suffering) transgender subject.

More recent NBD materials have continued to offer transgender subjects who are self-identifying and identifiable. In June 2017, I released a new NBD poster (Figure 4) through social media, which was created in closer collaboration with my organizational partners. This new poster features line drawings of four talking heads intentionally situated as in some way transgender by their speech bubbles. This is the first NBD visual to feature transgender and/or non-binary people, and explicitly links the 'no big deal' of NBD to *using* someone's pronoun, not to how a person relates to their (etc.) own pronoun: 'My pronoun is a big deal; using it doesn't have to be a big deal for you,' the header reads. It is telling that, on Facebook alone, my post containing the new poster garnered over 600 shares in the first few days of its release, far exceeding even the *modified* ('*I'll Use* Your Pronoun, No Big Deal') NBD badge's shares during its initial rollout. The new

Figure 4. The latest NBD poster featuring images and voices of transgender people.

poster, like the modified badge, was often shared with qualifying commentary that performed relief at NBD's move to centre explicitly transgender subjects: *I'm so glad to see this campaign's message evolve over time.*

Implications for gender-expansive policy and practice in education

In my theoretical framework, I argued that bodily discomfort at encountering non-normativity is irreducible to a clash with one's deeply-held beliefs. Rather, being able to say 'my

discomfort' is an achievement of self-recovery; it is how I belatedly seek to restore my illusory sovereignty, by narrating as 'my feelings' the affective intensity of getting caught up in assemblages. This catching-up is most intensive and so most disorienting at assemblage thresholds, where gender (among other) norms emerge into heightened sensation. It is non-normative to become conscious of all the ways we infer gender when 'choosing' a pronoun to use for someone else: to find oneself investing any degree of effort in a normatively effortless task. Within this framework, reason – even a careful, reasoned argument in favour of transgender rights – is no match for the affective intensity produced by (and producing) the non-normativity of some transgender peoples' pronouns, and reason cannot convince a person they are not feeling awkward or anxious when they perceive that they are.

It may be a bad tactic to ask people with little specialist knowledge of gender to deny that they feel awkward or anxious when doing something they usually feel to be effortless. A worse tactic is to misrecognize someone caught up in and coping with surges of affective intensity as articulating a rigid, political opposition to transgender rights. This can be the case, but it is not always. Systematic misrecognition might lead one to understand themself as 'justifiably' anti-transgender because they need to palliate anxiety through recourse to narration of some kind. An internal monologue, perhaps: *what if I get it wrong and they get mad at me? Why do they over-react like that? What's wrong with them?* A better tactic may be to offer a re-framing that the anxious can employ: that the effort required to use some transgender peoples' pronouns is not excessive, but rather like other kinds of effort one invests in meeting the needs of different people in everyday life.

However, NBD arguably tripped the intensive threshold of a local 'transgender activism' assemblage because it is explicitly calibrated to the learning curve of cis-gender people with little exposure to transgender people or issues, little time to make an effort to accommodate us, and perhaps even little interest in doing so. NBD's tactics are non-normative because they do not presume nor even require any such interest. NBD reverses the usual pedagogical order of allyship, with its foregrounding of sovereignty: one witnesses examples of violence (broadly conceived) done to transgender people, learns key concepts, expends (and/as am identifiable as expending) effort on owning up to cis-gender privilege, and declares an explicit political stance as an ally born of sovereign decision-making. NBD instead suggests that 'supporting transgender rights' might just mean saying *sure. I can use your pronoun. It's NBD*. And little else. This possibility, in this network, was impossible.

In the remainder of the article, I turn directly to education and efforts to 'do something' about gender diversity in institutions like schools and universities which, numerically, are mostly populated by people who are not transgender and likely not confirmed allies, either. I argue that 'doing something about gender diversity in education' happens at the micropolitical level on which NBD seeks to engage the non-specialist public: the level of everyday inter/action, governed in schools by laws like Ontario's *Toby's Act*. This and other provincial or territorial legislation across Canada prohibit discrimination due to gender identity and gender expression in schools and elsewhere, but offer no legally-binding definitions or concrete steps for doing so on either grounds (see Kirkup 2018). I will derive some implications of NBD, its reception and its modification for gender-expansive educational policies and practices (see

examples in Seelman 2014), arguing that these events raise critical questions for how education might go about interpreting anti-discrimination protections in ways that make a material difference in the gendered life of schools (see Ashley 2018 for a counter-argument: that anti-discrimination protections are a bad strategy for making this difference).

Micropolitically, gender-expansive policies and practices may succeed based on whether they can change how (mostly) cis-gender institutional actors *feel about and narrate* their own involvement in the institutional commitments demanded by law and policy, in everyday life. In this way, when seeking to change school practices so that transgender and gender-nonconforming people might be and remain well there, it is useful to consider who is the *audience* of change and who is the *beneficiary*. In other words, who is and who ought to be foregrounded in policy implementation for maximum impact? For example, many Canadian school boards now have law-following policies that allow students to use the washroom matching their gender identity (e.g. Toronto District School Board Gender-Based Violence Prevention Office 2013; see Ingrey 2012; Slater, Jones, and Procter 2017). Any school plan to implement this policy has both an audience and a beneficiary. The *audience* is administrators, front office workers, custodial workers, hall monitors, etcetera: people whose daily work routines will change because of the policy, and who will be required to give voice to or educate others about the changes in order to go about the business of doing their jobs, which now includes ensuring that students are not hindered in any way from accessing any washroom. The *beneficiaries* of the policy and the implementation plan are, on the whole, the transgender and gender-nonconforming students who need these school workers (the audience) to implement the policy as seamlessly as possible.

In working to produce transgender peoples' needs as a site of merely extra effort – i.e. part of an unremarkable day and not an intensive, politicized encounter – *NBD is calibrated to the audience and not the beneficiaries of gender-expansive educational policy and practice*. NBD asks someone to do a thing and perhaps care little about politics in the process, producing transgender peoples' pronouns as a site of merely *extra* effort; this de-politicizes pronouns, and facilitates one saying 'nbd' instead of having to articulate a political rationale. Pivotally, however, the original NBD badge could not circulate in a queer and transgender network unless pronoun support was politicized to the extent of requiring sovereign, excessive effort. NBD's frictional reception within a social media network populated by its *beneficiaries* – transgender people and confirmed, self-conscious allies – produced a rigid and impassable threshold. Although modifications made NBD materials circulate more fluidly, the question remains whether 'I'll Use' rendered NBD less effective in relation to its *audience*. If pronouns must be politicized, and if doing what transgender-affirming policies require means stepping into a politic, might school actors with little or no interest in gender politics be less likely to do so? The underlying question raised by NBD for gender-expansive policy and practice in schools is, therefore, whether reception by beneficiaries is the measure of a thing's tactical utility in affecting audiences.

As educational institutions in Canada and elsewhere move to enact legal protections from discrimination on the basis of gender expression and gender identity, bringing them down to the earth of everyday life in schools and universities, the lessons of NBD's reception, modification and eventually seamless circulation suggest that a tactical

shift may be in order. Instead of foregrounding policy *beneficiaries* – usually some version of self-identifying and identifiable transgender subjects – we might think of foregrounding *audiences* who are necessarily being asked to make an effort. Can gender-expansive educational policy or practice welcome its audience of beginners, with open arms?

Notes

1. My discussion of gender-neutral pronouns as taken up for gender identity purposes is confined to Standard English and, for the most part, singular they/them due to its particular challenge for native speakers (see Bjorkman 2017). I do not engage gender-neutral pronouns in French Canada; this is because English and French differ markedly in structure to the extent that they present two distinct fields of inquiry in this area. I refer readers to Hord (2016) for a comparative exploration of gender-neutral language in the German, Swedish and French (but not specifically French Canadian) languages.
2. Some have written on GNP as a tool of gender liberation, or 'the next responsible step in the struggle to create a nondiscriminatory common language' (Wayne 2005, 89); however, writings that focus on GNP as a broader political tactic and not a need of some transgender people fall outside the scope of this article.

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