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“Faut-il choisir ?”: Transgender Access to the French Language Classroom

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“Je suis améri—euh—je viens des États-Unis.”

It was nine o'clock on a Thursday evening in late October 2016, and I was stuttering through my fatigue and attempting to smile up at the woman standing before me. Two months into my research stay in Paris, I was already accustomed to spending my Thursday nights at the *Archives, recherches et cultures lesbiennes* (ARCL), housed at the *Maison des femmes*, where a tight-knit group of radical lesbian elders would lend me novels and help me sift through dusty bins to find obscure political pamphlets. At that point, I was used to bantering with them about my research as we sorted through boxes together, but that night I was struggling to form a sentence. This was not only due to typical graduate student fatigue, though; it was because they all thought I was a woman.

It was the first time that I had gone into the *Maison des femmes*, a “woman-only” space, since I had decided to change my name and pronoun the week before. I had been prepared that night to be constantly misgendered, since I had made the decision not to reveal my actual sex/gender¹ in that context, lest I be excluded from this sex-segregated research space. But even if I had decided to remain “in the closet,” I had vowed, at the very least, not to misgender *myself* by employing the feminine. This small victory, however, was easier said than done in a grammatically bi-gendered language.

“Je suis étudia—je fais un doctorat à l’Université Columbia,” I answered, in response to her question about my studies. I cast my eyes down to the books she was checking out to me, waiting for her to hand them back so I could make a hasty exit. When I finally strode out into the chilly

¹ I use the term “sex/gender” here because I believe that drawing a distinction between the two upholds the idea that there is some form of biological sex that “goes beyond” gender identity. This biologically-essentialist notion is responsible for the oppression of transgender and intersex people. As Emi Koyana has written in “The Transfeminist Manifesto,” “*Transfeminism* holds that sex and gender are both socially constructed; furthermore, the distinction between sex and gender is artificially delineated as a matter of convenience. While the concept of gender as a social construct has proven to be a powerful tool in dismantling traditional attitudes toward women’s capabilities, it left room for one to justify certain discriminatory policies or structures as having a biological basis. It also failed to address the realities of trans experiences in which physical sex is felt more artificial and changeable than their inner sense of who they are” (Koyama 2003, 249). For an accessible account of why this distinction may be harmful, see the post entitled [“Sex and Gender Are Actually the Same Thing”](#) by the blogger Androgeneity.

autumn night air to unlock my bicycle, I was struck by the absurdity of my situation: there I was, with the scholarly books I borrowed on lesbian feminist Monique Wittig tucked into my backpack, afraid of gendering myself correctly in a space so historically attentive to questions of sex, language, and power.

My interest in gender neutrality in French had begun years before, during my experience as an undergraduate reading Wittig's *Les Guérillères* in a literary theory course at Bryn Mawr College. Wittig's intentional feminization of nouns and pronouns led me to doubt my previous French teachers' affirmations that the masculine form was the grammatical neutral. In graduate school, I would go on to read extensively about Wittig's sex and gender politics for my dissertation, and to reflect on how they might inform my feminist pedagogical practice. But this would take on an increasingly urgent and personal dimension when my own transgender identity slowly became integrated into my life as a scholar and teacher of French language, comparative literature, and political philosophy.

This piece is an attempt to revisit all of the awkward silences, the trailed-off words, the reformulated sentences, and the tactical omissions that structured my life during that research stay in Paris in 2016–2017. Rather than constituting a definitive set of guidelines, this piece revisits a few moments from the past several years of my life, which have converged to inform my own pedagogy in the French language classroom and beyond. It is a reflection grounded in my experience as a transgender teacher and graduate student, which argues that gendered linguistic practices are a matter of transgender justice, and seriously impact the lives of transgender, non-binary, and other gender nonconforming (GNC) teachers and students alike.²

1. Thinking Sex and Gender in the Language Classroom

Flashback to March 2015. I had received funding from a teaching fellowship at Columbia University to lead a departmental pedagogy workshop and decided to explore the broad theme of “gender and sexuality in the French language classroom.” I advertised it as an open discussion on pronoun use, misogyny and queer erasure in language textbooks, and sex/gender dynamics in classroom discussions. The day of the event coincided with a sizeable blizzard, so I sighed and resigned myself to low attendance that evening. Come six o'clock, however, I was astonished to see a steady stream of graduate student instructors and lecturers clomp in, shake the snow off of their coats, and settle in around the table.

I had decided to kick off our discussion with a piece written by our department's own Professor Elisabeth Ladenson, which discusses how issues of gender and sexuality often rear their heads acutely in the French language classroom. As Ladenson states, this is bound to come up in nearly any French classroom because of the gendered nature of the language itself: “As is the case for many languages other than English, moreover, French imposes from the start a disconcerting awareness of gender difference as encoded and enacted in grammar. To embark on the study of a

² These terms do not constitute an exhaustive list, but are rather the tip of the iceberg in reflecting the wide array of labels adopted by individuals who refuse the sex that they were assigned at birth. These labels vary culturally and historically, and individuals' own self-identification should always be considered the most authoritative source when referring to them.

Romance language is for a native anglophone unavoidably, on several levels, to experience gender trouble” (Ladenson 1998, 90). Though this article was written almost twenty years prior to our workshop, my colleagues and I still agreed that, despite Proust, Colette, and the romantic illusions of some study-abroad students regarding “Gay Paree,” we were woefully unequipped to address sex and gender in language as structural social and political issues.

Yet if it was a challenge to address issues of heteronormativity, it was quite a challenge for most folks to name or even recognize the problem of what writer and biologist Julia Serano has called [cis-normativity](#): “a societal mindset wherein cis/cisgender/cissexual are presumed to be the norm, while trans/transgender/transsexual people and experiences are deemed ‘abnormal’ by comparison (if they are even considered at all)” (Serano n.d.). This became clear when our discussion turned to the question of pronouns. Asking for pronouns was not a part of departmental culture, and questions poured out concerning how and why we were supposed to do this. These questions were coming from the very same colleagues who spent countless hours lesson planning, getting observed, and fine-tuning their pedagogical practice to ensure that students with different learning abilities or educational backgrounds would feel at home in their classes; yet somehow, this simple practice was presumed to be unnecessary and uncomfortable. And yet I knew that failing to attend to the needs of trans students would massively affect their participation and, most importantly of course, their mental health. In high-stress academic environments in which anxiety, depression, and suicide are still tragically common, transgender students are at higher risk when they feel that their very existence is being denied in the classroom. How could I explain that this wasn’t just a matter of being “politically correct,” but could actually, considered as part of a larger structural issue in the academy, be a matter of life and death for trans students?

A few individuals said that they had thought about it, but that they were concerned, as cisgender teachers, that they might put students on the spot, especially students whose pronouns might be “unexpected.” Presumably, they were referring to students who are perceived to have a gender presentation that does not match the sex that others presume was assigned to them at birth. (I briefly wondered whether my own pronouns at the time were “expected” to them or not.) Their concern was, of course, legitimate, as practices meant to be inclusive can sometimes lapse into eliciting students to share aspects of their identity when they are not comfortable doing so (just as I would go on to do at the lesbian archives). Though my response at the time was less than satisfactory, my subsequent experience as a transgender teacher has helped me to develop a list of best practices for myself—one which is never definitive and always evolving.

In order to balance student privacy with inclusivity, I combine oral and written forms of possible disclosure. I hand out a questionnaire on the first few days of class in which I ask students to identify, among other things, their name and pronoun. I also go around the room on the first day of class, asking students to state their name, major, pronoun—and then, to defuse any possible moments of awkwardness, something silly and distracting (favorite snack has proven to be a particularly fruitful topic). In order to make those forms of possible disclosure as consensual and comfortable as possible, I have developed the following practices regarding names and pronouns:

- 1) Instead of reading students’ names off of the roster to take attendance, I ask them to state the name that they would like us to call them in class followed by their last name. That

way, I can easily find them on the list by last name, without having to ask students what their listed name is and risk shouting their [deadname](#) aloud to the class. The legal and university policy barriers to changing one's name can be significant.

- 2) Before going around with pronouns in class, I make sure to mention that they are optional, so that students who do not wish to state their pronouns do not feel obligated to do so. I do this primarily for the sake of trans students who may not be “out” at school. I state my name and pronoun first to model this behavior for students.
- 3) I specifically state that they should tell me the name and pronoun that *they would like to be called in class*. This minor specification is for me an important distinction, as it implicitly recognizes that students' identities are complex and that, just because they have strategically chosen one pronoun in class does not mean that it encompasses their gendered experience in the rest of their lives. Everything should be done to support students' pronoun choice; in some contexts, this might mean framing pronoun use as a strategic choice that can be contingent upon the specifics of a given situation. This may be especially important in some study abroad contexts, where students might feel the need to use a particular pronoun because of an instructor's refusal to recognize their sex/gender. In other cases, the best strategy may be to encourage students to insist upon the use of one pronoun in all contexts. There is no one-size-fits-all solution!
- 4) I am sure to use the term “pronoun” and not “preferred gender pronoun” because for many transgender people, myself included, that expression implies a choice or preference that masks an *actual* pronoun. Similarly, saying that someone “identifies as [s'identifie comme]” a particular sex/gender also sounds disrespectful to many trans people. A trans woman does not *identify* as a woman; she *is* a woman. This attempt at being respectful ultimately ends up sounding like a negation of transgender people's selfhood.

As we discussed some of those practices during the pedagogy workshop, I recall stressing that these measures not only help transgender students to feel at ease, but also model inclusive behavior for students who may not have been exposed to these sorts of questions. One colleague jumped in to agree that the above practice regarding first names also benefits international students, since many of them take different names when they are outside of their country of origin. She was right, and yet, despite my investment in the experience of international students, I found myself dismayed to see some of my more reticent colleagues suddenly nodding in agreement as if that is what had finally convinced them that this approach to names might be “worth it.” Why, buzzed a nagging voice in my head, did I need to convince teachers that something was beneficial to *all* students in order to advocate for trans students? While I do firmly believe that such practices do benefit all members of the community, I also wanted to ask: wouldn't it be worth it even if it was beneficial “only” to trans students?

At the time, my mind went blank with disappointment in myself at my incapacity to express that to my colleagues at a workshop that I was purportedly running. Looking at the clock, I decided it was time for a short break. As folks chatted and stretched their legs, I overheard two people talking about their experiences with student names and pronouns. “I have one student,” I heard one colleague say, “who goes by Matt,³ and I mean you really wouldn't expect it”—presumably,

³ This name has been changed for student confidentiality.

I thought with some frustration, because this person was not readably male-identifying?—“...But then that student,” she went on, “told me she goes by ‘she,’ so I said okay, no problem, I’ll refer to you by ‘she.’” For anyone else overhearing this, this would appear a rather innocuous anecdote of someone learning to respect students’ names and pronouns, even when they do not conform to their expectations. I, however, heard this story quite differently.

It just so happened that I knew Matt, a continuing education student around my age who was a friend of a friend of mine. Matt is trans and non-binary, and Matt’s pronoun at the time was *not* she; it was “they,” or occasionally “he.” I was not, of course, going to say anything or “out” my friend, and I do not presume to know why they decided not to share their actual pronoun in that context. I can imagine a few reasons, though. First, they may not have felt comfortable or that it was worth the energy to share their real pronoun due to structural cis-normativity. Second, they may not have known what their other options were without having been given some tools to navigate “they” pronouns and gender neutrality in French.

To address both of those issues, it is important to understand the overlapping issues of cis-normativity and sex/gender binarism. As we have seen, cis-normativity and [cissexism](#) refer to structural practices that implicitly or explicitly marginalize the experiences and needs of transgender people—such as assuming pronouns in the classroom. Returning to Serano’s helpful glossary, the term [binarism](#) refers to “actions, attitudes, or assumptions that adhere to, or uphold, a [gender] binary ideology” (Serano n.d.). If a transgender student states that they use gender neutral pronouns, stating that their pronouns are grammatically incorrect or illegitimate is an example of both cissexism *and* binarism. Though many transgender people may not require gender-neutral language, and may prefer to use gendered language to refer to themselves, addressing binaristic language by developing gender-neutral language practices nevertheless remains one crucial part of fighting cis-normativity.

What foreign language teachers model for their students in the classroom influences what they perceive as acceptable or possible to express. Drawing attention to those possibilities, their limits, and how they are being questioned emphasizes that these linguistic issues are political ones, which continually influence which forms of subjectivity are lent legitimacy. Even seemingly small shifts in classroom policies and practices can make a huge difference for transgender students who are already painfully aware of these questions.

At the same time, the pedagogy workshop that I led also made clear to me that, if eliciting pronouns and incorporating gender-neutral language practices are not explicitly framed as part of a larger agenda for trans justice, then the practice of asking students or colleagues to state their pronouns at the start of a class or meeting will ultimately fail to bring about significant change. What we need is to simultaneously ensure that students are able to express their names and pronouns while also recognizing that gender issues vary between languages and may require different strategies for students impacted by cissexism *and* binarism.

At the end of the workshop, I raised the issue of gender-neutral pronouns in French. The reaction that it provoked made it clear that anything that risked significantly questioning linguistic practice was out of the question for most people in the room. “But there *is* a neutral in French—it’s ‘il’!” “I understand that fluent French-speakers may want to experiment with that, but it’s

just too complicated for our students.” “Okay, if ‘il’ *isn’t* neutral—but it is, grammatically—then what should we use? There’s no other option!” “I agree that asking if students use ‘il’ or ‘elle’ is important, but the whole gender neutrality thing seems like a lot of time to devote to a question that affects so few people.” The same person to whom Matt had not disclosed their pronoun or trans identity concluded glibly, “Mais à un moment donné, il faut choisir.”

“You have to choose.” I sat quietly, dimly aware of the valiant efforts of other people in the room making the case for gender neutrality. “Having to choose” wasn’t news to me: as a masculine-presenting person who, at that time, was still uneasily presenting and identifying as a cisgender woman, I was used to dissociating my way through conversations about sex and gender with colleagues, feeling a firm separation between myself and the feminine pronouns and accords that were constantly applied to me. I was profoundly uncomfortable in my role at the time as an “ally” to trans students, but too unsure and afraid to ask for anything else, especially in a professional context. That resignation didn’t feel like much of a “choice” to me, though. And I doubt it did to Matt either.

II. Learning from Linguistic Practices in Trans Communities

Flash forward a year and a half to October 2016. It had been a little over a month since I arrived for an exchange year at the École normale supérieure in Paris, and I was riding my bike at breakneck speed through the unpredictable traffic patterns of Paris’s gayborhood, the Marais. I’m in a familiar situation: I’m late. The simmering malaise that made it increasingly difficult for me to leave my apartment, and which had been building up over the course of the previous several years, had come to some sort of head; maybe it was the constant barrage of hearing myself described using feminine adjectives, or the constant “madames” (or, more and more commonly, a muttered “monsieur...dame”). Or maybe it was the distance from my professional milieu back in New York. Regardless, there I was attempting to avoid being unacceptably late for the monthly meeting of a local trans support group at Paris’s only self-identified queer⁴ bar: [La Mutinerie](#).⁵ As I locked up my bike, I imagined a bunch of queers lazily sipping beers on a Saturday afternoon, in a dark room where I could sidle in unnoticed about twenty minutes late

⁴ While the precise difference between “gay” and “queer” is difficult to nail down, given that both relate to non-normative sexual practices and identities, one can nevertheless affirm that self-identified queers in a French context are likely to view their sexuality as linked to certain forms of progressive politics, and as inclusive of a fuller range of sexes/genders.

⁵ Though the Marais is packed with “gay bars,” it contains a scant few lesbian bars and only a single bar that labels itself queer (though a few others are known to be more or less “queer-friendly”). For La Mutinerie, this means a number of things, including the fact that the bar has a library and hosts cultural and political events. One of the most obvious practical effects, however, is that while gay bars clearly cater to cisgender gay men (sometimes to the point of barring entry to anyone read as having a different sex/gender), La Mutinerie consciously seeks to create a space for all sex/gender minorities (though cisgender men are allowed entry). For La Mutinerie’s website, visit: <https://lamutinerie.eu/>

and shyly observe from the sidelines. Appreciating the blacked-out windows protecting the interior from prying eyes, I swung open the door.

Approximately forty sets of eyes were suddenly fixed on me as I emerged into a huge circle of chairs. Everyone had fallen silent. How is it that I had come to the only event in the history of Paris to have started on time? “Salut,” said one of the sea of faces. “On a déjà fait le tour du groupe et tout le monde s’est présenté-e. Tu peux nous dire ton prénom, ton pronom, et—si tu veux—pourquoi tu es venu-e?”⁶ Rooted to the spot, my mind went blank. I mumbled what was at that time still my name, and attempted to find the words to tell people—for the first time in my life—that I was transgender. Just as the moment began to be palpably awkward, the door swung open, and the owner of the gay bar across the street burst in and alerted us that the neighborhood was on lockdown following a suspected gunman on the loose. No one was to leave the bar. As dozens of trans people stared around at each other in fear, with the November 2015 attacks fresh in their minds, I was sure that I was the only one feeling some bizarre form of relief in that moment. After five minutes or so, there was a general sigh of relief as we were notified that it was a false alarm. In this flurry of anxiety, thankfully no one thought twice about the confused American who had been cut off mid-sentence. Thus, with the backdrop of the intensely racist and Islamophobic French security state, I came out—to myself at least—for the first time as transgender.

Even though I had momentarily been saved by the bell, I couldn’t indefinitely postpone a decision about my pronouns and accords. While every pronoun felt alienating to me, “she” was certainly no longer tenable, and “he” was not quite right for a variety of reasons, so I settled on “they” in English. This did not eliminate a number of gender issues in English, but it was a start. But what about French? The words of my colleague still rang in my ear: “Il faut choisir.”

However, almost every new person I met taught me that other options were legitimate. Thinking back upon my earliest exposure to various trans communities in Paris, many of whose members espoused varying forms of sex/gender that were neither man nor woman, I can now think of a number of possible ways to begin to accommodate students who use “they” pronouns in English:

- Varying pronouns and accords
 - Some people fluidly referred to themselves by alternating between the masculine and the feminine and asking others to do the same. They might also alternate when referring to themselves while asking others to use exclusively either the masculine or feminine.
 - In a classroom context, students might switch back and forth depending upon the day, week, or month, or depending upon the assignment (for example, they might write which pronoun they are using at the top of each assignment).

⁶ If I employ inclusive past participle accords here, it is not only to begin incorporating these linguistic practices into my own writing, but also to emphasize that the leaders of this trans-only group were clearly using language that would not presume my sex/gender based on my appearance. The ease of the formula also attests to the fact that so many words and phrases in French are not audibly gendered, and it is sometimes easier than we think to be linguistically inclusive.

- Using “iel,” “ille,” “yel,” or other non-standard gender-neutral pronouns, with consistent or varying accords (roughly equivalent to the use of “ze” in English)
 - The gender-neutral pronoun “iel,” though not yet common in French, is becoming increasingly well-known. Some people use this with either masculine or feminine accords, or alternate between them.
 - Rather than creating confusion, this can actually be a great teaching opportunity to go over the way gender works in French and the current innovations of trans and non-binary people.
- Purposefully mismatching pronouns and accords
 - Some people enjoy playing around with the effect of using masculine pronouns with feminine accords, or vice versa: “Elle est beau; il est belle.”
 - This option is likely to cause great apprehension among French teachers: “How will they understand grammatical gender?!” Though this may not always be the best choice for those learning French as a second language, it is worth mentioning that students would still use traditional accords in the language more broadly (when referring to any noun). Furthermore, in order to use “mismatching” pronouns and accords, they would need to understand the correct original accord in order to make the switch.
- Avoiding gendered language altogether
 - One helpful strategy is the increased use of epicene adjectives (ones whose gender does not change, such as “triste” or “orange”), or adjectives whose gender is not aurally discernable (“fatiguée”).
 - One might also, as I did at the lesbian archives, choose formulations that avoid gender altogether (“Je viens des États-Unis” rather than “Je suis américaine”; “une personne généreuse” instead of “un homme généreux”).

Yes, doing this all the time may be very difficult, even for native speakers. However, helping beginner and intermediate students get used to these practices—even if it’s just *part* of the time—makes a difference and gives them a more thorough understanding of the relationship between gender, language, and identity. For teachers, the point is not to be perfect, but to present a variety of options to students. This demonstrates that we see our trans and GNC students as people worthy of respect, that we are taking the issues that they face seriously, and that we are available to help each student find the strategy that works best for them.

III. Confronting Cis-Normativity in Academia

Flash forward a few months from that fateful day at La Mutinerie in Paris, to my plane touching down at JFK Airport in New York in December 2016. I was not exactly feeling calm for the holidays; returning to my personal, familial, and professional obligations with a new name and pronoun was not easy. However, I was expecting to feel at least *one* relief: I was returning to a language where interactions could, at least sometimes, be less obviously gendered, and I could begin using “they” pronouns regularly.

The previous months had been a challenge. I had been impatiently waiting to go back to New York to attempt to start hormone replacement therapy (HRT)⁷ on a very tight time schedule. Given the problematic gatekeeping practices used to prevent trans people from accessing hormones in France (and in most parts of the United States), I was grateful to be able to return to New York City, where the process might possibly be expedited. I was hoping so; being constantly gendered feminine was really beginning to take its toll on my mental health, especially since I was not “out” in most of my research spaces. I hoped that telling my professional network about my new name and pronoun and beginning HRT would stop people from automatically referring to me with feminine pronouns and accords.

Ever since I had asked my friends in France to refer to me with the pronoun “il,” I had become increasingly aware by contrast of how wrong feminine pronouns and accords felt for me in most contexts. I had opted for “il” not because it is in any way neutral, but as a compromise; it is a masculine pronoun, but it was the closest I could get to the neutral as an AFAB (assigned female at birth) person, especially before I began my medical transition. I would occasionally go by “iel” when I was among people who would use it; at the same time, my trans friends and I understood that just because someone used “il” or “elle” did not mean that they were “binary.” (Indeed, even people who identify as trans men or trans women often do not see themselves as “binary,” though of course some do.) My life felt like a series of linguistic compromises. My friends in Paris frequently expressed envy at the fact that I could go back to a language that was gender-neutral, and their envy is in part what motivated my inner sigh of relief as my plane landed in New York.

I was thus surprised to discover that English did not provide me with the relief I had anticipated. English was less often grammatically gendered, to be sure; but I quickly became aware that the capacity to use gendered language had sometimes been an advantage to me in Paris. Linguistic gender markers sometimes helped me to affirm my correct sex/gender in social situations when people did not know whether to read me as a “man” or a “woman.” French gave so many opportunities for me to be misgendered, but it also presented many opportunities for me to gender myself; when people looked askance at me I could casually affirm my own accords—it did not demand the same kinds of awkward corrections I sometimes find myself giving in Anglophone contexts. Since I cannot usually casually refer to myself in the masculine or feminine forms in English, I have often found myself awkwardly telling administrators, for example, which boxes to tick on forms when it is not clear to them. (That said, being able to do so in French is of course no guarantee that it will be respected.) Furthermore, the existence of a gender-neutral pronoun in English made it all the more frustrating when people who knew my pronoun *still* refused to use it or insisted that it was grammatically incorrect.

Upon returning to campus, I found myself mentally revisiting so many previous discussions I had had with fellow language teachers and graduate students, and found it challenging to keep the emotional distance that I had long entertained in professional circles. I had never met another

⁷ Commonly referred to as HRT, hormone (replacement) therapy refers to a treatment in which hormones produced by the body are supplemented. For many transgender people who decide to medically transition, HRT is an important component. HRT is also common amongst menopausal cisgender women.

“out” transgender graduate student or instructor at Columbia, though I was sure there must have been others. When I contacted the Office of Diversity and Inclusion to see if there were any support networks for transgender graduate students, or if I could be put in touch with other students facing similar issues, I was told that the only trans graduate students they knew of had left their programs. I felt discouraged. This feeling was only compounded by the fact that many of those around me who professed to support trans people were unable to wrap their heads around why coming out in a “liberal” university setting might be challenging.

My life became a constant chorus of variations on the same theme: “Sorry, but this whole ‘they’ thing is hard for me!” It did not seem to occur to most people that being misgendered might in fact be “harder” for me than learning a pronoun was for them. Transgender people know more than anyone how hard it is to experience this form of constant pushback and misgendering. And if ever the discussion slides from the “purely linguistic” into the political (as if the two can be separated), if I tell someone that the binary sex/gender system is not real, if I refuse to speak to someone who insists on repeating to me that my gender “identity” is fine, but that ultimately “biology is biology,” then I am met with: “Why are you so sensitive? Why are you so angry?”

As a gay non-binary transmasculine person⁸ with little desire to fit in with cisgender people, here are a few reasons why I, and many other transgender people, may sometimes seem “angry.” Usually I would not be so self-indulgent as to list these sorts of experiences, which are trivial compared to the struggles of most trans people, and, in particular, trans people of color. If I do so, it is only to give a sense of why these linguistic demands are so immediately personal, so immediately political. It is also to speak from my position as a trans educator to advocate for my trans students. Since I have been “out” as trans in academia, I have been: told to stay in the closet in order to have access to “women-only” (read: trans-exclusionary radical feminist)⁹ research and activist spaces; told that I can no longer be a real feminist because I am a “man”; been informed that I am self-hating for “renouncing my womanhood”; been misgendered and deadnamed in meetings; been deadnamed in administrative e-mails months after having changed my name in what felt like every possible university database; had people who barely know me ask me personal questions about my medical decisions and anatomy, including at professional events; been bombarded with statistics suggesting that I have even less of a chance than most humanities

⁸ The term “transmasculine” is generally used to designate people who were assigned female at birth but no longer identify as such; it may or may not connote a medical transition in addition to a social transition. The term “non-binary” refers to individuals who do not see themselves as fitting into the category of either “man” or “woman.” My own identity, as is the case for many transgender people, cannot necessarily be concisely encapsulated and depends a great deal upon the group of people in which I find myself at any given time.

⁹ Trans-exclusionary radical feminists (TERFs) root their feminism in the immutability of sex/gender and the oppression of transgender people, and in particular transgender women. While the term “women-only” may be appropriate in certain specific contexts, it almost always connotes “cisgender women only” and depends upon the policing of bodies. TERFs typically treat transgender women as if they are not women or as if they are infiltrating “women’s spaces.” Many TERFs also assume that transgender men are traitors to feminism or threats to their spaces; this is particularly true in radical feminist and lesbian spaces I have frequented in Paris.

graduate students of getting a job; have had to “out” myself to all future employers because of having publications in my previous name. My experiences are not unique, and I have been much more fortunate and supported than many other transgender graduate students. Most people have faced many more difficult challenges.

All this is to say that pronouns and gender-neutral language are the tip of the iceberg, and must be contextualized within structural efforts for trans justice both within and beyond the classroom. Asking for a student’s pronoun will not mean much in a classroom that does not otherwise take trans experiences into account. In foreign language teaching, for example, we need to revisit and revise trans-exclusionary textbooks with materials that do not purvey cissexist and binarist attitudes,¹⁰ and to critically engage with those problematic materials still in use. Funding must be allotted for such ventures. Study abroad offices and language departments should help create guidelines and generate lists of resources for transgender students, in order to support them during their time away and help them navigate these issues in a less familiar cultural environment. At a broader institutional level, supporting trans students means creating and improving administrative procedures for students to indicate their real name (even if they have not or do not intend to legally have it changed), assessing the usefulness of sex/gender boxes on administrative forms, providing affordable and comprehensive healthcare that is inclusive of care for transgender students who medically transition, and staffing on-campus psychological and medical services with trans-competent providers.

Broadly speaking, being an ally to trans people means stepping up when demands are formulated, actively trying to understand those demands, and understanding that inaction has serious consequences on trans people’s health and well-being. It means maintaining an open-mindedness to those demands even when they are stated in a way that might be upsetting or destabilizing to cisgender faculty or administrators. It means asking for resources trusted by trans communities rather than only waiting to be educated by trans people, who are often emotionally exhausted by constantly being asked to explain their very existence. So to those cisgender people who say, when we discuss trans inclusion or gender neutrality in academia, that this issue is challenging, that they want to help change things but that “it’s hard,” I respond: transgender, non-binary, and gender-nonconforming people *know* that it’s hard. We know that because we live that difficulty every single day. But we keep showing up, and we hope you will too.

¹⁰ To give one example, Sophie Labelle’s web comic [Assignée garçon](#) is accessible for beginner and intermediate language learners. For more on Labelle’s work, see Vinay Swamy’s contribution to this issue.

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