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## Introduction: The Adventures of Trans Educators: A Comic Book Issue

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## Introduction

# The Adventures of Trans Educators: A Comic Book Issue

Harper B. Keenan, Lee Iskander, and Rachel Marie-Crane Williams

Through our work in teacher education and trans advocacy, the three of us (Harper, Lee, and Rachel) are lucky to regularly hear about the important work trans educators do every day. Whether it's helping students to organize gender and sexuality alliances, mentoring trans youth, working with teachers' unions to improve health care benefits for people of all genders, or simply showing up to school and being present for their students, there is no doubt that trans educators are making important and necessary contributions to learning environments across North America and beyond.

We are also keenly aware that appreciation of the work trans educators do is rare. Over the last five years, trans people of all ages have become increasingly targeted and demonized, especially in relation to schooling. Around the world, lawmakers and politicians are drumming up anti-trans prejudice among the public, positioning trans people as scapegoats for manufactured moral panics and, ultimately, advancing socially conservative political agendas (Reid, 2024). In many places, including the U.S. and Western Europe, transness has frequently been framed as a kind of harmful "social contagion" (Broderick, 2023). Not only is such rhetoric rooted in the belief that transness itself is a problem, the concept of social contagion has been used as justification for widespread efforts to pass legislation that would heavily restrict the rights of trans youth and educators. Too often, the rhetoric of social contagion has led to efforts to push trans people out of public education and to separate trans adults from children. This issue of the *Bank Street Occasional Paper Series* aims to do just the opposite: to celebrate and learn from the presence of trans educators in young people's lives and to work toward a field of education that is far more inviting to trans people of all ages.

## TRANSGENDER PEOPLE AND EDUCATION

Although K-12 schools have always had gender non-conforming people working in them, it is only relatively recently that education research and scholarship have addressed the experiences of transgender people. Trans teachers were the subjects of news articles long before our lives and work were the subject of education research. In the 1970s, there were two high-profile cases of trans teachers—Paula Grossman and Steve Dain—who were fired from their jobs in K-12 schools because they had made public gender transitions (Bryan, 1976; Stumbo, 1976; Hanley, 1978; Keenan, 2021). Grossman and Dain were otherwise respected veterans of the classroom. Dain had even been awarded Teacher of the Year prior to transitioning. Yet despite these teachers' decades of service to their students and communities, they and their students were betrayed by their employers' refusal to allow openly trans adults to work in classrooms.

Scholarly attention to the experience of trans people in U.S. schools has steadily increased over the last 20 years. The majority of the early research in this area focused on the experiences of trans and gender non-conforming students, typically painting a dismal portrait of social marginalization and other struggles faced by these youth in schools. Although this research demonstrates how schools contribute to the rigid institutional regulation of gender, it does not attend to how trans people have managed to wrest free of that regulation, both individually and collectively. For example, supportive connections

with trans adults are just one of the many strategies that gender non-conforming young people rely on to make their way through schools. In many cases, these connections are more meaningful than the common understanding of “role models.” Beyond providing basic representation for young people, the presence of trans educators in schools offers an unusual opportunity for intergenerational knowledge construction for transgender people (Morris, Greteman, & Weststrate, 2023). Only recently has educational scholarship focused on the experiences and contributions of trans educators and what we might learn from them (Harris & Jones, 2014; Iskander, 2022; Jourian, Simmons, & Devaney, 2015; McEntarfer & Rice, 2023; Suárez et al., 2022; Ullman, 2020).

## TRANS EXPERIENCE ON OUR OWN TERMS

In Issue 52 of the *Occasional Paper Series*, we have worked to create space for trans educators to describe their teaching experiences from their own perspectives, drawing inspiration from the interdisciplinary scholarly area of trans studies. Trans studies began to coalesce as an area of academic study in the 1990s and was constructed both out of trans social movements and in resistance to conventional approaches to studying transness in social scientific and medical research. Rather than taking an explanatory approach to transgender identification or searching for ways to “include” trans people within existing institutional structures, trans studies takes a more radical approach, asking questions like: How did the general public come to understand gender through a normative binary, and how do we get ourselves out of it? What can the general public learn from the experiences of transgender people? In thinking through questions like these, scholars in trans studies usually find it helpful to foreground the plurality of experience within communities of trans people. Then they consider how knowledge derived from trans experience might enable new or different forms of understanding, and what the experiences of trans people might reveal about social and economic conditions more broadly.

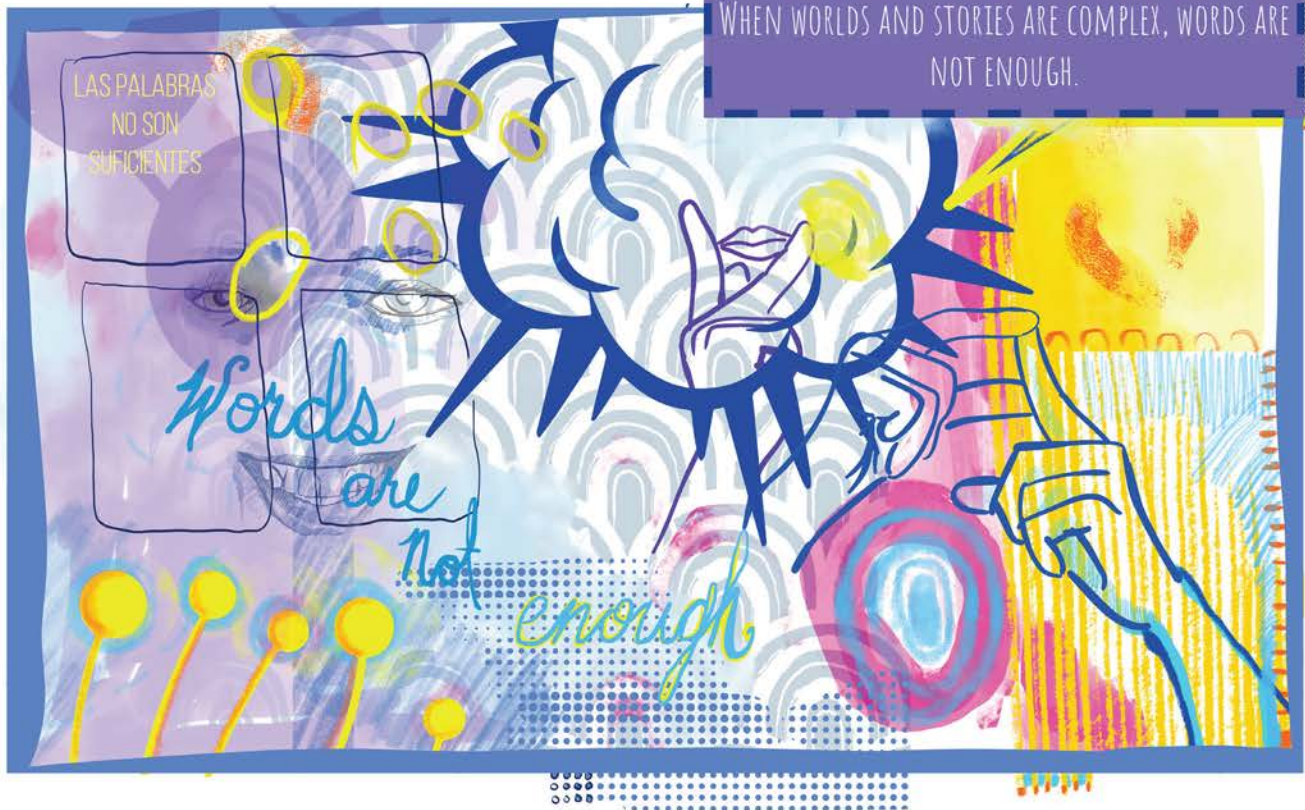
Trans pedagogy is an emergent concept brought forward by scholars working at the nexus of education and trans studies. Although those of us who have written about trans pedagogy have each made unique contributions to its conceptualization, we all tend to argue that meaningful engagement with transgender experience has the potential to change dominant approaches to teaching and learning (e.g., Keenan, 2017; Keenan, 2024; miller, 2016; Muñoz & Garrison, 2008; Nicolazzo, Marine, & Galarte, 2015; Malatino, 2015; Platero & Drager, 2015). For example, trans pedagogies could propel students toward deeper study of how each of us comes to understand our sometimes-evolving sense of our own and others’ genders (Malatino, 2015); to learn about how trans people approach the task of teaching about gender differently from what might be typical in K-12 school settings (Keenan, Hot Mess, Newbold, & Iskander, 2023; Keenan, 2024); or to analyze the history of colonialism in structuring narrow and prescriptive ideas about gender as they are expressed in educational institutions (Muñoz & Garrison, 2008).

## CREATING THIS ISSUE AS A COMIC

The three of us believe that thinking about trans pedagogy demands some engagement with the material experiences of transgender people who work in K-12 education. Even as the very idea of transgender people in schools is treated as a matter of political debate, there are hundreds of trans people going to work with young people every day—tying shoelaces, opening milk cartons, checking math homework, and directing school plays. Trans educators are also teaching outside of traditional classrooms in contexts like museums, summer camps, and programs like Drag Story Hour and Freedom School Toronto. While a cacophony of opinions about trans existence proliferates within and beyond classroom walls, trans people are actively teaching. We are present and working in those rooms every day to steward young people’s learning. What can those of us working in the field of education learn from the daily realities, challenges, and joys of trans educators?

To give you a peek into the daily work and contributions of trans teachers, we decided to share their stories in comic form. We hope that presenting these stories visually might help our fellow educators see that trans people are not an abstract concept. The stories of trans educators are complex, and words alone were not enough. Comics provide an expansive opportunity for world-making, storytelling, emotions, design, visual imagery, text, and sequence.

THE ACT OF WORLDMAKING IN COMICS, IN SOME WAYS, IS PARALLEL WITH THE WAYS THAT TRANS PEOPLE HISTORICALLY HAVE QUESTIONED, MADE, AND RE-MADE THE WORLD FROM WHAT IS KNOWN AND WHAT CAN BE IMAGINED. WORLDMAKING IS A POWERFUL ACT OF RECLAMATION, REJECTION, RECOMPOSITION, AND CREATIVITY.



COMIC CREATORS MIGHT ADOPT PICTORIAL AND NARRATIVE CONVENTIONS, REIMAGINE THEM, OR IGNORE THEM ALTOGETHER IN THE WORLDS THAT THEY PRESENT.

LIKE GENDER, COMICS ARE COMPLEX AND MULTI-LAYERED. YOU CAN "READ" COMICS, BUT TO UNDERSTAND THEM, YOU HAVE SOME INTERSECTIONAL SENSE OF LANGUAGE, SYMBOLS, AND THE CULTURAL CONVENTIONS THE CREATOR EMPLOYS.

LIKE GENDER, COMICS HAVE A HISTORY OF STEREOTYPES, CONVENTIONS, AND TRADITIONS.



NOT ALL COMICS TELL A SEQUENTIAL STORY, BUT AS HUMANS, WE CAN'T HELP BUT PUT THINGS TOGETHER AND MAKE A STORY BASED ON WHAT WE SEE. IF TWO PICTURES ARE PLACED NEXT TO EACH OTHER, OUR IMPULSE IS GENERALLY TO FIND SOME NARRATIVE THAT WILL LINK THE IMAGES.

WE LINK THE PAST TO THE PRESENT AND THE PRESENT AND PAST TO THE FUTURE. WHAT HAS BEEN, TO WHAT IS, TO WHAT CAN BE.

**CRASH!!!**

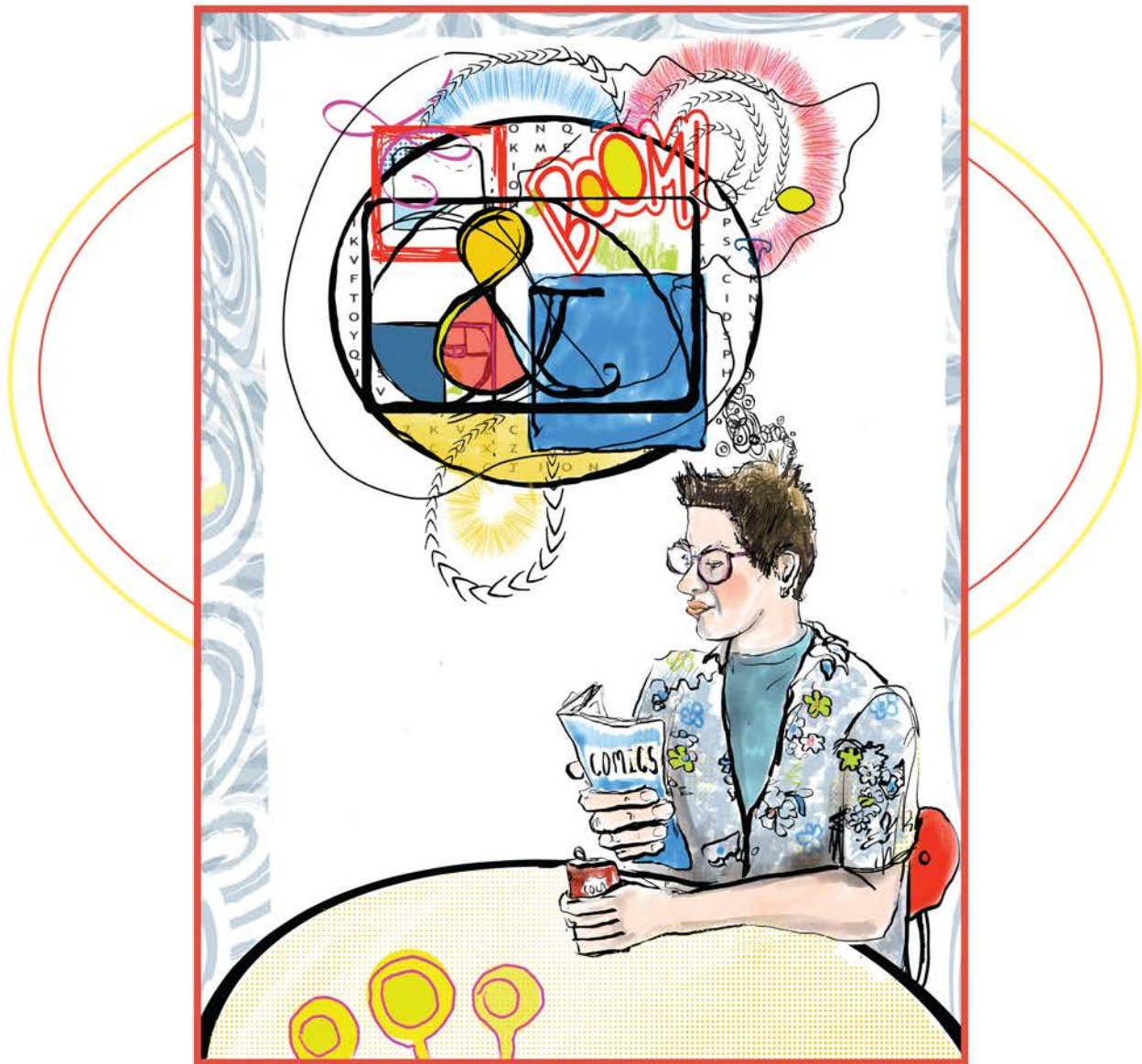


THEY WERE BLOCKING MY SUNSHINE PATCH!



THE ABILITY TO CONNECT ONE IDEA TO ANOTHER AND TO ALLOW TIME TO HELP US UNDERSTAND HOW TO MAKE SENSE OF PATTERNS THAT AT FIRST SEEM CHAOTIC, DISCORDANT, INCOMPREHENSIBLE, OR UNRECOGNIZABLE IS AN ESSENTIAL PART OF READING COMICS AND OF BEING HUMAN. WE ARE ALWAYS COMPOSING STORIES TO HELP US MAKE SENSE OF THE WORLD.

# COMICS ALLOW SO MUCH FREEDOM.



COMICS OFFER AN OPPORTUNITY FOR READERS TO MOVE FLUIDLY BETWEEN WORDS, IMAGES, PANELS, PAGES, AND SPREADS. THERE IS THE POSSIBILITY OF LITERARY LIBERATION; READERS ARE NOT REQUIRED TO PLOD SLOWLY FROM ONE WORD TO THE NEXT, LINE AFTER LINE, PAGE AFTER PAGE, IN ORDER TO COMPREHEND THE STORY.

READERS CAN LOOK AT JUST THE PICTURES, IGNORE THE WORDS, READ ONLY THE SPEECH BUBBLES OR NARRATION, OR ADMIRE THE DESIGN.

COMICS ALLOW "READING" TO BEGIN ANYWHERE ON THE PAGE. MOST COMICS ARE BEST READ IN A PARTICULAR SEQUENCE, BUT FOR SOME READERS THAT SEQUENCE COMES LAST IN THE ACT OF CONSUMPTION.

# WRITERS



# ARTISTS

OUR WRITERS AND ARTISTS HAVE COLLABORATIVELY EMPLOYED COMICS, CREATIVITY, IMAGES, TEXTS, AND WORLDMAKING TO TELL STORIES ABOUT TEACHING AND LIVING, AND TO MAKE A SPACE FOR THE STORIES OF PEOPLE WHO WILL COME AFTER THEM.



## CREATING THIS ISSUE AS A COLLABORATIVE PROJECT

This issue came to fruition through an extended collaborative process. We were overwhelmed by the number of submissions we received in response to our call for narratives from trans educators, which highlighted that there are many trans educators working in a variety of educational settings who want to share their experiences with the wider public. We went through the difficult process of selecting just a few of these submissions, with careful attention to featuring a range of trans positionalities and educational contexts. Then, each educator was paired with a queer and/or trans-identifying comic artist to translate their narrative into comic form.

It was exciting and powerful to witness how the partnerships worked together to ensure that each educator's story was told with careful accuracy and sensitivity, a respect that is far from guaranteed in much media representation of transgender people. Through their work together, many of the creative teams built friendships that we expect will last far into the future. This is the kind of relationality that we seek to cultivate within the field of education: one that begins from a premise of welcoming trans people into the teaching profession and builds networks of support that will sustain their long-term contributions to the teaching and learning of young people.

## OVERVIEW OF CONTRIBUTIONS

The comics in this special issue represent a diversity of artistic styles, narrative devices, and experiences in schools. Some zoom in on a particular day or moment, while others chart a journey over years or decades. They do not tell simplistic stories of oppression, resilience, or triumph. Instead, the contributions to this issue collectively illustrate the nuances of trans educators' experiences across a range of regional and educational contexts. These comics are meant to reach beyond the walls of academia: they can be shared online, emailed to friends and colleagues, printed out, photocopied, or left in a school library or staff room for others to find. They will interest students, teachers, teacher educators, researchers, and members of the general public who want to learn more about the many contributions of trans people in education.

The comic written by Sam Long and illustrated by Quan Phan, and the one written by Owen Dempsey and illustrated by Jet Lepper, take the reader on journeys of personal growth and self-reflection. Both begin by welcoming us back to school: in Long and Phan's comic, the reader is prompted to remember what it is like to be a new teacher; in Dempsey and Leppers's, we are invited into Dempsey's recollections of being a trans teen struggling to imagine a future.

In *How's Teaching Going?* Long and Phan take the reader through an emotional journey that is at once ordinary and unique, showcasing both the ordinary insecurity that many new teachers feel and the apprehension felt by many trans educators when it comes to sharing their trans identity with students. Yet Long's story does not adhere to a familiar narrative that positions "coming out" as inherently liberating: even after he shares his story with his students, they still do not follow his directions.

Similarly, Dempsey and Leppers's comic, *Ten Year Reunion*, about becoming the teacher Dempsey wished he'd had when he was young, avoids the expected conclusion. Lepper's illustrations juxtapose Dempsey's teenage and adult selves, using color and pattern to produce a complex commentary on the relationship between who Dempsey is, who he was, and who he wants to be. Dempsey and Lepper's comic illustrates how trans experience is a gift that enriches the support and depth of understanding educators can offer their students.

The comic written by Yarrow Koning and illustrated by Sofia Abreu, and the comic written by Per Sia and illustrated by Ali Blake, showcase the power of queer and trans joy, resistance, and persistence

in contexts the anti-trans backlash has targeted. In *Always Been*, Koning and Abreu take on Florida's anti-trans legislation. Their form of resistance is to turn our attention to the quiet power of noticing the persistent queerness and transness of the natural world. On the title page and hidden throughout the comic, readers will find species of ecological beings that defy sex/gender binaries, including gynandromorphic butterflies and fungi. Abreu's illustrations contrast the beauty and color of queer and trans humans and more-than-humans with humans who want to repress that diversity and see the world in black and white.

Readers of *Socrates and Me* by Per Sia and Ali Blake might similarly search Blake's colourful and intricately detailed spreads for hidden gems: in this case, illustrations of children's books that celebrate gender diversity. The story follows Per Sia to her last performance as part of Drag Story Hour before a much-needed vacation. While the backlash and protests targeting Story Hour are mentioned, the comic does not dwell on these; instead, it focuses on the feelings of happiness and acceptance Story Hour instills in children, their families, and Per Sia herself. For Per Sia and Blake, a Story Hour event's joyfulness drowns out the hate.

The comic written by Nora Borre and illustrated by Farra Yasin, like that written by Daniel Gallardo and illustrated by Martin Pech, showcase trans educators' ingenuity in navigating education workplaces where others may not understand or accept them fully. Borre and Yasin's comic, *More Than*, follows Borre's considerations as they attempt to explain their trans experience and gender-neutral honorific, "Mx," to their colleagues and their kindergarten class in Texas. The comic highlights Borre's efforts to teach young children about non-binary identity creatively, thoughtfully, and sincerely while also striving to understand their students better.

While Borre and Yasin's comic draws attention to the extra work trans educators may be called on to do even in supposedly supportive workplaces, Gallardo and Pech's comic focuses on an explicitly hostile workplace. In *Your Roots Are Showing*, we tag along with a fabulous drag artist and trans femme as she tries to find employment as a teacher in Mexico's school system.

With humor, color, and plenty of queer cultural references, Pech illustrates the main character's misadventures as she conspires to become "he/him" —the hyper-masculine, blond man a school principal seems to be looking for. The comic is a compelling and entertaining commentary on the enduring anti-trans stigma that prevents many skilled educators from becoming teachers.

The issue concludes with a comic by James F. Woglom, Stephanie Jones, and Dylan Brody titled, *A Light in Dark Times: An Overt Defense of Trans-Affirming Spaces in Education*. Unlike the other contributions to this issue, this comic is not autobiographical. Instead, it is a comprehensive treatise on the current anti-trans backlash and its impact on schools. Merging academic writing, enthralling illustrations, and references to key gender studies texts, the authors and artist make a strong case for gender-affirming educational environments. As the authors argue, such environments enable critical thinking, promote joy, and create enough breathing room for all adults and children to show up to learn and teach in their full humanity.

Through these stories, we hope you gain a sense of liberation from restrictive and harmful conventions and are inspired to teach, learn, share, and see the broad possibilities of worldmaking for the greater good of teachers and the field of education. We hope that you will consider downloading the entire issue and use it as a resource for your students, colleagues, families, friends, and for yourself. The stories of trans educators we share in this issue are just a tiny slice of a big world. There are lots of comics that celebrate the stories, lives, and work of trans people. Here is a list if you want to read more!

**WANT TO READ MORE COMICS THAT CELEBRATE TRANS LIVES?  
CHECK THESE OUT:**



**GENDER QUEER BY MAIA KOBABE**

**A QUICK & EASY GUIDE TO THEY/THEM  
PRONOUNS BY ARCHIE BONGIOVANNI  
AND TRISTAN JIMERSON**

**A QUICK & EASY GUIDE TO QUEER &  
TRANS IDENTITIES BY MADY G AND  
J.R. ZUCKERBERG**

**BE GAY, DO COMICS BY MATT BORS,  
MATT LUBCHANSKY, SARAH MIRK AND  
ELERI HARRIS**

**NONBINARY BY MELANIE GILLMAN**

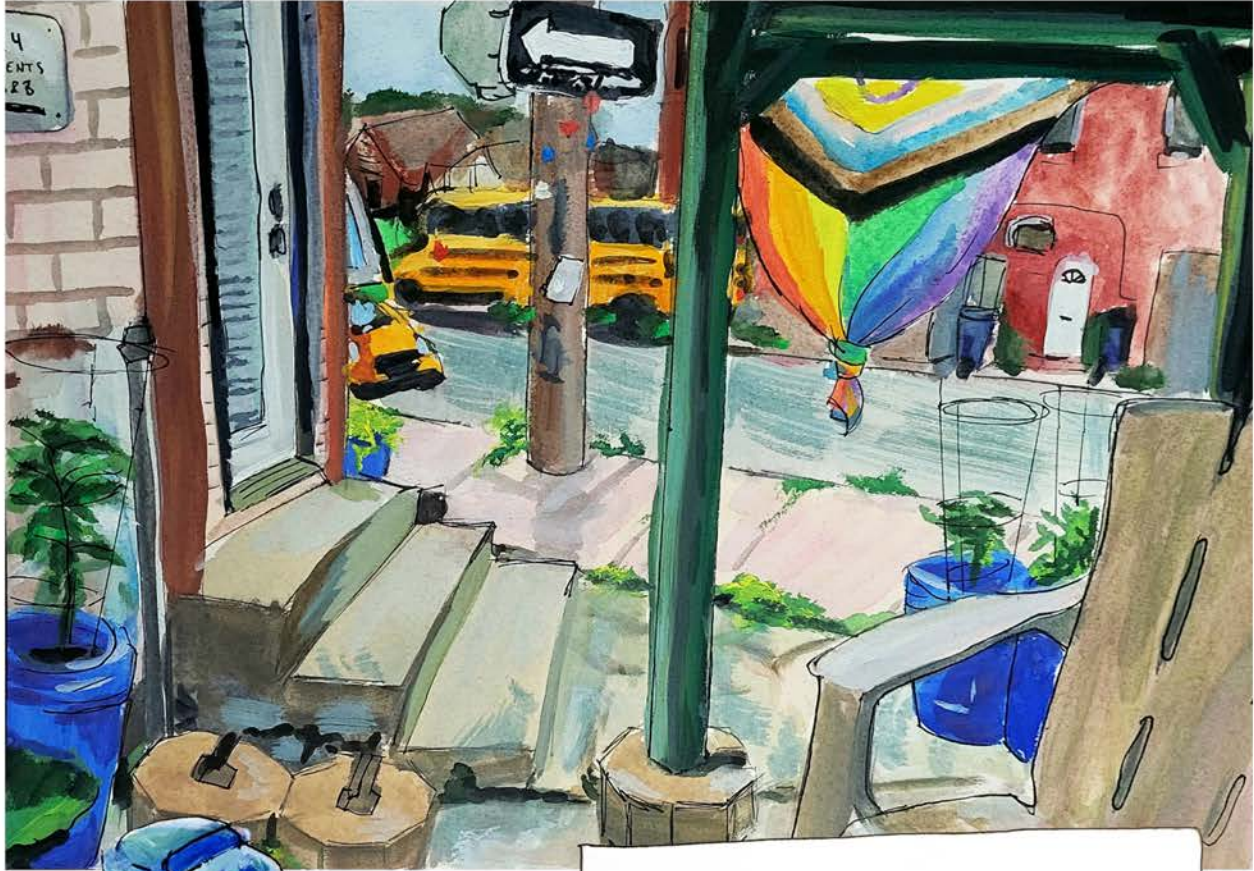
**COMING OUT, AGAIN: TRANSITION STORIES BY SABRINA SYMINGTON**

**MY LIFE IN TRANSITION: A SUPER LATE BLOOMER COLLECTION BY  
JULIA KAYE**

**SPECIAL TOPICS IN BEING A HUMAN: A QUEER AND TENDER GUIDE TO  
THINGS I'VE LEARNED THE HARD WAY ABOUT CARING FOR PEOPLE,  
INCLUDING MYSELF BY S. BEAR BERGMAN AND SALLI FREEDMAN-LAWSON**

**AT 30, I REALIZED I HAD NO GENDER: LIFE LESSONS FROM A  
50-YEAR-OLD AFTER TWO DECADES OF SELF-DISCOVERY BY SHOU  
ARAI**

**THE OUT SIDE: TRANS & NONBINARY COMICS BY THE KAO, DAVID  
DANEMAN AND MIN CHRISTENSEN**



*GOING BACK TO SCHOOL?*



*HERE ARE SOME RESOURCES TO HELP YOU FIND YOUR WAY...*



CLASSROOM TEACHER? CHECK OUT THESE CURRICULAR RESOURCES!

Adaptable mini-lesson about 2SLGBTQIA+ stories in Canada

Disability, gender and sexuality lesson pack

Gender and sexuality alliance action book

Lesson plans to create more gender expansive classrooms and support transgender and non-binary students

Teaching about gender diversity

Teaching LGBT History

Trans Hirstory in 99 Objects

Queer & trans history of Canada

GLSEN

Lambda Legal: Trans Workplace Rights

National Center for Trans Equality

Protecting Our Schools: A Handbook to Address Transphobia in Education

Trans Educators Network

TRANS EDUCATOR? THESE RESOURCES CAN SUPPORT YOU IN CONNECTING WITH PEERS AND ADVOCATING FOR YOUR RIGHTS!



TEACHER EDUCATOR? THESE RESOURCES ARE MEANT TO SUPPORT YOU AND YOUR PROGRAM IN WELCOMING THE NEXT GENERATION OF TRANS TEACHERS



Guidance on creating a "frequently asked questions" document for current and prospective trans students in teacher education

Visual resource for mentor teachers supporting trans teacher candidates

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



**Harper B. Keenan** is the inaugural Robert Quartermain Professor of Gender & Sexuality in Education at the University of British Columbia. Dr. Keenan's scholarship examines how adults and children relate to each other within the structures of schooling and other educational contexts, and what their interactions reveal about the possibilities and challenges of public education. He is also the founder of the Trans Educators Network, a mutual aid organization for support and connection among trans people working in K-12 schools. Before becoming an academic, Dr. Keenan was an elementary school teacher in New York City.



**Lee Iskander** (they/them) is an artist and scholar working at the intersection of trans studies, curriculum studies, and teacher education. Lee's research examines how discourses of gender and sexuality shape identities in educational spaces and has been published in the *Journal of LGBT Youth*, *Teaching Education*, and *Teachers College Record*. Lee's interest in gender and sexuality in schools arose from their experience as a youth activist. They are currently a doctoral candidate in the Department of Curriculum & Pedagogy at the University of British Columbia.



**Rachel Marie-Crane Williams**, a native of North Carolina, earned a BFA in Painting and Drawing from East Carolina University and an MFA in Studio Art and a PhD in Art Education from Florida State University. She spent 22 years as a professor and, later, department chair in Gender, Women's, and Sexuality Studies at The University of Iowa. She is lucky and happy to be the dean of liberal arts at the University of North Carolina School of the Arts, a position she has held since 2022. She is the creator of two graphic historiographies, *Elegy for Mary Turner: An Illustrated Account of a Lynching* (Verso Press) and *Run Home If You Don't Want to Be Killed: The Detroit Uprising of 1943* (UNC Press and the Duke Center for Documentary Studies). Her writing has also appeared most recently in *Southern Cultures*, *Mississippi Quarterly: The Journal of Southern Cultures*, *Meridians*, *Feminist Studies*, and *Visual Arts Research*. Her work as an artist is grounded in narrative painting, printmaking, and illustration. The natural world, field research, scholarship, ephemera, and drawing heavily influences her imagery. She works in oil, aqueous media, and digitally.