Moving across Differences
Blackburn, Mollie V.

Published by State University of New York Press

Blackburn, Mollie V.
Moving across Differences: How Students Engage LGBTQ+ Themes in a High School Literature Class.


For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/102860

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=3232133
Although students were somewhat practiced at negotiating sexual identities, they were less practiced at negotiating gender expressions and identities. They were not alone. Whereas being lesbian and gay were removed from the American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* in 1973, long before any of these students were born, *gender identity disorder* was changed to the less stigmatizing *gender dysphoria* in 2013, when these students were teenagers. By the time our classes were meeting, though, Laverne Cox was famous for her role in *Orange Is the New Black* (Kohan, 2013–19), and *Transparent* (Soloway, 2014–2019) was a television series. Moreover, Caitlyn Jenner publicly disclosed her identity as a trans woman toward the end of the first class. As such, conversations about the complicated nature of gendered identities were beginning, but they still had (and have) a long way to go. For that reason, it is worth taking a moment to discuss some of the terminology I use in this chapter and in the book more broadly.¹

Gender identity is “how an individual feels about themselves, intuitively, and then writes themselves into the world”; gender expression is the “physical manifestation of one’s gender identity” (Miller, 2019, p. 86). They are interrelated but not synonymous. Miller (2019) conceptualizes gender identity as both “trans-sectional” and “trans-cultural.” This means that gender is always among multiple forms of identity, all of which are “in

¹ The following three paragraphs are a modified excerpt from an article published in *Pedagogy, Culture & Society* (Blackburn, 2021).
perpetual deconstruction and construction and are identified by... indefinite integration and ever-shifting amalgamation of identities” (Miller, 2019, p. 74). Moreover, “when complex gender identities move across different physical, material, and symbolic borders, they activate and fortify (although temporally) new gender identity formations” (Miller, 2019, pp. 75–76). This conceptualization of gender aligns with my experience with students in the LGBTQ+-themed literature course. This means that when I represent them in terms of gender, it is a partial representation, always, but it is also a tentative one.

I use the word *trans* as an abbreviation of *transgender*, drawing on Airton and Meyer's (2018) definition, to describe “individuals who blur the lines of binary gender identity or gender expression” (p. 322). I interpret this definition to include individuals who are “gender transgressive,” or, in Serano's (2016a) terms, “downright ‘breaking’ the laws of gender” (p. 267). In keeping with the National Center for Transgender Equality (2016), I use the word as a “broad term...to describe people whose gender identity is different than the gender they were thought to be when they were born.” I use *cisgender* to describe people whose gender identities are the same as the gender they were thought to be when they were born. These definitions are not universal; indeed, no language is, and certainly not language as contested as “trans-related terminology” (Serano, 2016a).

In describing each student, I use terminology as specific as possible to honor their differences from one another (Green, 2016). Moreover, I use language they use. This is complicated in that I have spent a lot of time with them; they described themselves in different ways over the course of a semester (not to mention in the years we have been in touch since). Another complication is that sometimes the words they used did not align with how those words are typically used, whether colloquially or academically. Reasons for this might be simple, like the vocabulary may have been new to them, or complicated, like they may have been struggling with internalized hatred. I can find myself getting dizzy on what Serano (2016a) calls the “Activist Language Merry-Go-Round” (p. 247). But, as she points out, the merry-go-round doesn't stop because we find the right language; it stops when the associated stigmas stop. In an effort to be a part of the work of destigmatizing trans identities and expressions, I forge ahead, cautiously, carefully.

As students languaged gender, they moved around and in trans-ally, gender-fluid, and trans communities. They read, wrote about, and discussed fiction, such as *If You Could Be Mine* (Farizan, 2013) and *Brooklyn, Burn-
ing (Brezenoff, 2011); nonfiction, such as Beyond Magenta (Kuklin, 2014) and Some Assembly Required (Andrews, 2014); and the lives of those on a school-wide panel to discuss issues pertinent to trans people. Whereas sometimes they stood back and deciphered characters and people, trying to figure out their gender or maybe even sex (e.g., male, female, intersex), other times, they pulled themselves in to connect and to be allies or members of various trans communities. I examine such movement in this chapter, but I also take a look at an example of apparent stagnation, when a student stood firm as an immutably masculine man.

Trans Allies

That said, the effort of cisgender students to move themselves toward transally communities and thus near trans people was something I saw across classes and across texts. This was evident in the third-semester class as we read and discussed the fourth chapter of If You Could Be Mine (Farizan, 2013). (For more on teaching this book, read Blackburn & Deiri, 2018.) In the chapter, Sahar, the main character and narrator, attends her cousin Ali's party, escorted by Ali's friend Parveen. While Sahar has been in a romantic and sexual relationship with her best friend, Nasrin, for a long time, this is the first time she has been in a social gathering of LGBTQ+ people. There is drinking, drug use, and dancing; Sahar is completely out of her element. Parveen proves to be a good friend while they are at the party, then Ali informs Sahar that Parveen is trans, which challenges Sahar to recognize and interrogate some of her transphobic ideas. In the class, students shared journal entries responding to this prompt: “Identify any line in chapters 1–6 that stands out to you. Write the line. Explain why it stands out to you.”

Delilah selected a line from the end of chapter 4 where Parveen put her number in Sahar's phone, and when she returns her phone, their hands touch lightly. According to Delilah, “there's tension between them.” Kristy added that after Sahar found out that Parveen was trans, “Parveen put her arm, like, around Sahar's shoulder,” Sahar “stiffened,” and Parveen removed her arm. These lines, identified by Delilah and Kristy, reveal Sahar's transphobic behavior toward Parveen. I named what I heard Delilah and Kristy to be suggesting: “The key to what you just said is 'after she found out,' right? So that when Sahar understands Parveen as a girl, she likes her, right? Not flirting, but likes her. And then when she finds out that she's
Moving across Differences

a trans girl, her transphobia kind of starts flaring up. So she winces from her, she doesn’t, you know, so that we see some evidence of transphobia in Sahar.” Sahar’s transphobia, however, needs not be permanent, as Kristy suggested with the line she selected, where Sahar says, “I take the mobile back and thank him. Her. Thank her. Damn it” (Farizan, 2013, p. 51). Here Kristy recognized in Sahar a self-awareness akin to her own. Kristy explained, “I think that’s really important because people, like, who are accept—are like trying to accept a person as transgender, if they misgender them, they get really upset about it, and they try to—they like correct themselves immediately after, and then they constantly are like saying their new gender in their head to, like, not have that happen again, whether they say it to that person or just in their thoughts or something.” In this way, Kristy recognized both Sahar and herself as cisgender people who get upset when they misgender trans people they are trying to accept and work deliberately to prevent doing so again. I underscored this trait of Sahar, at least, when I affirmed Kristy, saying, “Right. So we know that she has transphobia, but she’s working on it, right?” Not only is Sahar working on it, so too was Kristy. In this way, together, we recognized Kristy, the student, alongside Sahar, the character, as moving from past encounters in which she struggled or even failed as a trans ally and moving toward future encounters in which she would embody trans allyship, recognizing that such movement requires ongoing effort, not one good step and done. It requires moving, deliberate movement. Such movement, then, opens up possibilities of trans allyship.

Lisa and Kristy practiced identifying transphobic ideas and behaviors in reading this novel. Lisa, for example, noticed Ali behaving in transphobic ways. She said, “I picked the line where Ali was like, ‘Don’t be so square, Sahar. Parveen’s a transsexual.’ I’m like, ‘Really?’ This made me really upset because I didn’t like that Ali was telling Sahar Parveen’s business without her permission. I was like, ‘That’s not cool.’ . . . Also, at the same time, I don’t like how he makes it seem like it’s so obvious.” Lisa critiqued Ali for disclosing Parveen’s trans history and for belittling Parveen by suggesting she is not convincingly feminine, implying a trans ally like herself would not do either of these things. Kristy emphasized Lisa’s point, saying, “that’s what [trans people] work hard for, is so that they feel comfortable in the gender they want to be; it’s not for you to be like, ‘Oh, it’s obvious.’” Here, Lisa and Kristy were struggling and striving to be trans allies while being outside of trans communities. They were not perfect allies; for example, one could judge Kristy for talking about what gender trans people want
to be as opposed to are, but no one did, and I would argue that there is no such thing as a perfect ally. Still, Lisa and Kristy moved toward being allies by critiquing the shortcomings of Ali as a trans ally, at least in some moments in time. Thus, they moved toward trans-ally communities by metaphorically pushing against a character in whom they identified transphobic ideas and behaviors. In doing so, they opened up a future of possible encounters in which they embody trans allyship.

Similarly, Desiree critiqued Sahar for her superficial understanding of trans people. A significant part of the plot of the novel is that Sahar wants to transition to living as a man, not because she is a man or even feels like a man—she is not; she does not—but because she wants to marry her lover, who, like Sahar, is a woman. In the setting of this novel—in Tehran, the capital of Iran, around 2010—being transgender is considered an illness that needs to be cured. As such, gender-affirmation surgeries and other medical interventions are legal. In contrast, being gay or lesbian is considered illegal and therefore needs to be punished. This is why Sahar seriously considers transitioning. That said, from the perspective of students in the class, who have grown up in the twenty-first century in the United States, where being gay or lesbian is legal, even where it is understood to be immoral, transitioning just to be with the person you love seems impulsive and reckless; moreover, it seems to trivialize the experiences of transgender people. Desiree made this point when she shared the line she selected, which was when Sahar says, “There is so little time before the wedding. I don’t really have time to decide whether I am making the right decision” (Farizan, 2013, pp. 76–77). After reading this line aloud, Desiree quickly critiqued Sahar:

She’s making the wrong decision, because every day people struggle with, like, the fact that they want to be a different gender, and I feel like she’s doing it for the wrong reasons. And that just sits very uncomfortable with me, and I don’t like it. Because there are people that struggle with this decision every day; you’re just doing it because you want to be with the other gender. . . . I don’t feel like you should change your sex or your gender because you just want to be with this person.

Desiree described the difference between Sahar and trans people in terms of what Sahar “want[s]” versus how trans people “struggle.” In this way, she passionately articulated a problem with this plot element in the novel.
Further, she, like Lisa and Kristy, pushed off of a character to move herself toward trans allies, opening up a future of possible trans allyship.

Another plot element of If You Could Be Mine that raised issues of cultural rather than individual transphobia was about the roles of women and men in contemporary Tehran. Khalil wondered aloud how Parveen got to Sahar’s house to escort her to the party. He said, “I’m kind of confused, because I’m like, ‘So why did she travel by herself?’” Desiree explained that her AP Government class had recently studied Iranian “customs and . . . values” and that they had learned that “one woman is not allowed to go anywhere by herself.” Kristy suggested that perhaps Parveen is still understood as a man even though she is a woman:

Ali said that everyone knows about Parveen. So maybe because [transitioning is] legal, he said that it’s legal and the government actually helps pay for it, because they want to help “fix” them, and so he says, like, everyone knows. . . . So like—well, my thing is I think that it’s because everyone—or they might still see Parveen as the male, so like—or even though they see her as a female, they know she used to be a male, so they think she has the capacity to take care of herself. I don’t know. It still should be like even if she has that transition, she still should not be out by herself.

Here, students grappled with understanding a contemporary story set in a very different city and country than their own, one they had studied but not experienced. Simultaneously, they struggled with values that they had learned to be both sexist and transphobic to understand a plot element. Thus, the students recognized they were quite far away from Parveen in some ways, including geographically and nationally, but they were simultaneously pulling themselves toward her in terms of gender, both as a woman and as a trans woman. Although no one in the conversation identified as a trans woman, they pulled themselves near trans women as they tried to understand their experiences better—that is, as they tried to earn their places in trans-ally communities. In doing so, they moved

2. It is possible that this particular plot point is simply an authorial oversight, which might be explained by the fact that Farizan grew up in the United States. Her parents were born and raised in Iran, but she was not; therefore, she might not have thought through this detail.
themselves farther away from past encounters when they perhaps enacted transphobia and closer to future encounters when they might be more likely to enact trans-positive behaviors.

**Gender Fluidity**

As described in the introduction, *Brooklyn, Burning* (Brezenoff, 2011) is a novel in which neither the main character, Kid, nor the love interest, Scout, is identifiable in terms of sex or gender. We read and discussed the book in the first-semester class, and Kid’s and Scout’s sex and gender were the topic of many of our discussions about the book, including a conversation shared with the author after finishing the book (for more on this, read Blackburn & Schey, 2018).

Many times in these discussions, students stood back and deciphered the characters, struggling to ascertain their sex and gender. For example, Parker wondered aloud, “I’m just curious if the fact that Kid is living on the streets, and there’s, like, a stereotype of surviving on the street that comes with masculinity and strength—you know, I wonder if that part of Kid plays into Kid’s gender.” Parker suggested that Kid is a young man as evidenced by their living on the streets. I understood Parker as talking specifically about gender, as distinct from sex, which I underscored by saying, “Right. Like the performance of gender is, in part, a protection device.” But then Parker either clarified that they were talking about sex rather than gender or used the words interchangeably, saying, “Like would it be more difficult for Kid to live away from home in this warehouse if Kid were a female? Because like then they’re subject to different dangers, you know.” Rhys clarified Parker’s point, saying, “Girls are normally more common to be, like, to, um, fear males.” Here, students talked about Kid, trying to figure out their sex and gender by analyzing the way they behave in particular contexts, like the streets, and in response to other characters, particularly men. They drew conclusions, albeit not definitive ones, based on their interpretations.

Other times, students again just stood back and watched, but instead they let go of the need to figure out either the sex or gender of the characters. Consider, for example, this interaction:

**Corey:** [Their sex and gender has] just [been] open throughout the story. But I honestly don’t—I mean, while I do think that,
I don't think the fact that it's not gendered changes anything about it, because we're all just people. I don't think gender really changes anything, is what I'm saying.

JAMIE: I think that's the point.

COREY: I think we're all just people.

JAMIE: I think that's the point. A lot of people get too hung up on gender, hence the reason that it is gender-neutral, because everyone—people are just people, and it makes it easier for people that are so hung up on that to just get into it. . . .

RHYS: So, that's how I'm going through it. I'm just like, whatever. I don't care; I don't even need that information.

Here, three students, one of whom identified as a cisgender man, another who identified as a cisgender woman, and a third who experimented some with gender, stated that gender does not matter because “we're all just people.” You can hear an adapted-to-gender color-blind mentality echoing through these comments, which is what I think Parker was hearing when they said, “What if they’re trans, though. . . . That's what [Simon] and I keep discussing.” It’s worth mentioning that Simon had already disclosed his trans identity to the class and Parker had, just that day, at the start of the class, said this:

PARKER: I have an announcement.

DR. BLACKBURN: What? You have an announcement?

PARKER: Yeah.

DR. B.: I want to hear it.

PARKER: Today is, like, I am going to gender therapy for the first time.

DR. B.: Hey, congratulations. Oh, that is great, yay. Where will you go?
PARKER: Somewhere in [local] hospital.

DR. B.: Excellent, excellent, and will it be after school or during school?

PARKER: Yeah, well, during school, but I get to leave early.

DR. B.: Oh, I hope it goes wonderfully. Let us know, if you are comfortable with that. Congratulations. That is big.

Thus, Parker communicated that they were actively pursuing questions around gender; further, they were publicly affirmed for doing so. So perhaps it was not surprising that Simon and Parker’s classmates took up their question, saying, “Oooh,” suggesting that was a new thought coming from arguably the only trans students in the class. This new thought marked a place of movement. One that surprised me because I always assumed Kid was trans. I figured the students shared my assumption, but their reaction to Parker’s comment suggested otherwise.

Parker’s suggestion opened up possibilities and thus challenged students to step into the story to get to know the characters, rather than to decipher them or just let them be. Rhys, for example, immediately after, considered these possibilities: “I think that Scout’s more feminine, and then I think that Kid is more masculine. So we can kind of stick them on a gender spectrum. But they could very well be, like, Scout could be female-bodied or not, Scout—Scout can be like male-bodied and Kid could be female. It’s just we don’t know.” Here, Rhys deliberately separated sex and gender and thus strove for a more complex understanding of Kid and Scout. Then Jamie suggested that Kid might be gender-fluid:

JAMIE: I think Kid might want to be gender-fluid. And like, go back and forth.

DR. B.: What makes you think that?

JAMIE: . . . I think they want to be fluid because they have feminine qualities and they have masculine qualities that they don’t want really—I don’t think they lean necessarily more toward one or the other fully?
Dr. B.: That’s supported by the dad’s response, right? “You need to decide.” Or “you need to make the choice” or something.

JAMIE: Yeah, yeah.

Following Rhys’s lead, Jamie observed Kid’s “qualities,” rejected dichotomous notions of gender to describe them, and instead opted for “gender-fluid.” Parker’s comment seemed to invite that possibility. Such an effort relied less on stereotyping than the deciphering approach did and more on engagement than the we’re-all-just-people approach did. Thus, spending time with, in this case, characters and getting to know them allowed for movement toward, a connection.

I saw this even more so in the second semester. We did not read the book as a class, but several students read it independently, and sometimes we talked about it before and after class. Mac acknowledged that it was “hard to decipher” the gender of Kid and Scout, but when I asked whether this bothered them, they said, “No, I’ll figure it out. . . . I know that there’s probably a reason for it that they intentionally did.” Not only did it not seem to bother Mac, they seemed to really enjoy the book and all of its gender ambiguity. When I initially asked who was reading it, Mac was the first to respond:

Dr. B.: Anybody reading *Brooklyn, Burning*? Just because I’m curious. How’s it going?

MAC: It’s going really good.

DR. B.: Is it, you like it?

MAC: I’m reading it and I’m just like—Bae. Kid is bae.

DR. B.: Aww.

MAC: So is Scout. And Felix. And Fish.

DR. B.: Yeah.

MAC: Everyone.
Dr. B.: Oh good, oh good. Yeah, I think everyone has—you can see the good in a lot of people.

In addition to reading and enjoying it, they drew a bookmark of a significant character (see figure 1). Recall that Mac was engaging with this book entirely of their own choice and on their own time. And with the

![Felix illustration](image)

Figure 1. Mac’s illustration of Felix in Brezenoff’s (2011) *Brooklyn, Burning*. 
way they were imagining the characters, they were building community with them, as people who experience gender fluidly. That is to say, Mac, who identified as white, moved within gender-fluid communities as they embraced the characters in the novel. Rather than moving toward trans-ally communities, like some other students had, or even toward trans communities, Mac was unique in moving among others like themselves, even if those others were characters in a novel.

Interrogating Normal

It was in the first few weeks of the first semester’s LGBTQ+-themed literature course when I noticed some students were using the word “normal” when what they meant was cisgender. I had failed to call them out on the spot, so when normal was used similarly in the book we were reading, Susan Kuklin’s (2014) Beyond Magenta: Transgender Teens Speak Out, I raised the issue. The book is a collection of photo essays focused on six different teens. We were discussing Nat’s story, entitled “Something Else.” Nat uses they/them/their pronouns and describes themself as intersex. The first sentence of their story is, “How can I explain myself to someone normal?” (Kuklin, 2014, p. 121). When we discussed the story as a class, I said, “I also noticed that [Nat’s story] started off with them using the same thing we fell into last week of the normal versus cisgender, like, ‘How can I explain myself to someone normal?’ ” The initial student response was one of pity; Kimberly said, “It is kind of sad like reading trans stories when they say things about, like, normal people because it implies that they feel like they are abnormal . . . I mean. It’s like, ‘Aw, it’s okay.’” Here, Kimberly moved herself near and perhaps a bit above Nat but not with Nat.

Then, though, there was an extended conversation about the word and concept of normal. Cobalt said, “There is no such thing as normal”; Kimberly suggested it was a “social construct.” Cobalt and Jamie mentioned that it was used in “hurtful” and “derogatory” ways. Then several students considered normal as relative; Darby described it as having “mostly . . . to do with what environment you are in,” and Parker extended this to time periods. Corey said Hunter S. Thompson predicted that weird would eventually become normal, quoting him as having said, “When the going gets weird, the weird turn pro.” Sarah then brought the conversation back around to LGBTQ+ people. She said, “I think it is weird. There has been
LBGT people for since people began, like they always been there, but like now it is just starting to be considered, like, normal, but they have just always been there.” Here, Sarah moves herself near LGBT people, and not above, as Kimberly did with trans people, just near. I explained that there has always been same-sex desire and diverse gender expressions but that the terms lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender are comparatively recent. Then I said, “It is interesting when the behaviors get named and how that defines normal and not normal. It draws a line between normal and not normal. I think LGBT, as you point out, kind of does that work. It can mark people.” Here, I moved myself more closely with queer communities than LGBT ones by pointing to how in claiming and assigning sexual and gender identities people mark themselves and are marked by others in relation to normalcy.

Moving around and in Gender-Fluid Communities

Cameron is one of the six teens in Kuklin’s Beyond Magenta; in some ways, their story is the most prominent. Cameron is featured on the cover of the book, wearing a pink button-down, jeans, a black bow tie, a rainbow belt, earrings, and a digital watch. Throughout their chapter, there are twelve full-page color images, which is much more than any other teen’s section. Cameron appears in skirts in some of these photos, ties in others, jeans and T-shirts in others.

When we discussed Cameron’s story in the second-semester class, students began with confusion. In the first thirty lines of a 150-word encounter, students used some derivation of the word confuse five times and contradiction three times. Carter said, “They seriously confuse me. Like, like because . . . not like serious contradictions, but like, some contradiction in what they say. It’s kind of confusing.” Katherine and Yanika reiterated Carter’s sentiment. Together, they seemed to be trying to decipher who Cameron was. Mac, who identified as gender-fluid, said this:

That’s also something; it was like, he did—and it was like, “yeah I identify as a guy,” but I don’t think he ever—or they ever, you know, touched on the fact that they were gender-fluid. Like they briefly brought it up, like, “I mix, like, my outfits—I’m a little bit feminine, a little bit masculine,” but they never really talked about coming out as, like, gender-fluid . . . I don’t know,
I just—I wanted to hear about that, because they do prefer they/them/their, so I wanted to hear about how they, you know, they were already saying that they were questioning, you know, gender roles, but they never went into the specific of “oh, I’m gender-fluid.” . . . I would have just liked to hear about that.

Mac’s comment marks a sort of shift in the encounter, when students started trying to connect with rather than decipher Cameron and their experience.

For example, Carter connected to Cameron’s account of coming to school and asking everyone to call them by their name and to use their pronouns. Cameron said people mostly adjusted, but “I had some issues with two teachers, that didn’t make a whole lot of sense to me because they never knew me as a girl, so why would they call me she?” (Kuklin, 2014, p. 114). Carter related to this because she changed the name by which she was addressed when she came to the school. She said,

Since I’ve been here or whatever, most people, like, people who knew, uh, who have known me outside of me going here, like, they, uh, they call me by my actual first name or whatever, but then there’s people here that I’ve met, like, just here or whatever, so they know me by [Carter] . . . but sometimes, like, people will call me, like, my first name. And it’s like “what are you doing, . . . you don’t know me outside of school,” like, so for people who’ve known me before, I’m like cool with you calling me by my first name, but like, if you haven’t, then we have a problem because you met me by this name, so why are you calling me something I did not tell you to call me?

Having made this connection, Carter no longer expressed her confusion or pointed to Cameron’s contradictions. Mac built on Carter’s story, saying,

It’s like when people call me by my first name. It’s like, “I will fight you.” My friend, he—he knows . . . [and] he calls me by “she” and then my first name. It’s fine; he’s been my friend for so long that it’s like, it’s normal. But it’s like, if someone here who I introduced myself to—I introduced myself as [Mac] and usually most people around here call me “he”; if they call me “she” it’s fine; I don’t really have a problem with it, but it’s like,
last year I was going by just “he.” . . . But um . . . last year I was, you know, “I’m a he,” and there were people that were like “she, she, she, she,” and I’m like, “I’ve never known you before this year, why are you doing this?” But I get, like, yeah, I look outwardly feminine and if you call me a “she” and you don’t realize that I’m going by “he,” I can understand that. But it’s like after I correct you, that’s where it gets irritating.

Thus, Mac followed Carter’s lead by connecting to Cameron’s story and built on it by talking about their name and the use of pronouns.

Ann, who identified as white, still connected with Cameron, albeit in a different way, a way that surprised me. She was responding to what ended up being the last time someone used the word confusing to describe Cameron’s story. She said, “I mean, I guess like being bigender or gender-fluid or any of those terms that fall under the nonbinary umbrella, that doesn’t mean you’re necessarily fifty-fifty; you can feel like you’re 90 percent a guy and 10 percent a girl, or 80 percent a guy and 10 percent a girl and 10 percent something else.” Here, Ann explained to her classmates that being nonbinary does not suggest some even balance between two genders, thus educating them about some gender-fluid people. Then, she went on to connect Cameron’s story to her own. She said, “I think there’s a difference between—this is coming from some deeply personal stuff; I’ve been questioning my own gender lately. There’s a difference between feeling dysphoric in your gender and dysphoric in your body. Because like, I’m totally cool being a girl, but I don’t always feel comfortable in a female body.” Beyond this moment, I never, before or after this conversation, heard Ann talk about questioning her gender or sex. Here, though, she named that question as a part of her experience and, further, made the sophisticated move of disentangling gender, that is, “being a girl,” from sex, or being “in a female body,” as she shared her questions. In these ways, Ann moved toward trans communities.

Just as students connected to Cameron, who we read about and discussed, they connected to one another, like Mac connected to Carter’s account of name usage. I also built from the accounts students shared. For example, while Mac was talking about people referring to them using he/him/his, I worried about having used they/them/their. So, I asked:

Dr. B.: Okay, so on the first day you said “any pronouns.” So, if I—I need to know if you prefer—
Mac: No, no, that [story] was like last year when I was going by just “he.”

Dr. B.: Okay, because I do not want to be disrespectful to you.

Mac: No, no, you’re fine. I did say that was fine. But—

Dr. B.: What do you prefer today?

Mac: [laughs] I don’t care. . . . And don’t worry about, because I’ve had people who [indecipherable] he or she. I’m in the process of questioning again, so don’t even worry about it because I feel both ways.

Dr. B.: Well, I want you to question as much as you want. But when you land on something, keep me informed, okay?

Mac: Gotcha.

Dr. B.: Thank you.

Mac: I am just everywhere. I have a bad habit of just going everywhere when I start talking in this class.

Dr. B.: I was following you.

Although I can, in retrospect, see plenty of errors I made in this interaction (like why does Mac have to “land somewhere,” at all??), I can also see that I reached out and connected to Mac about something that mattered to them in ways that were respectful even if flawed. I was certainly not alone in striving to be respectful. Katherine explicitly said, “I don’t want to be, you know, insulting or disrespectful,” and John apologized for first using “he” to refer to Cameron and then started using “they” to talk about Cameron’s story.

While reading about Cameron, students moved from feeling confused by to connected with them, thus moving closer to Cameron as a gender-fluid person. For some students, like Carter, this meant moving closer to a gender-fluid community. For others, like Ann, it meant seeing the possibility of entering such communities, and for Mac it meant moving
within their gender-fluid community as they came to understand someone who was both alike and unlike them within that community. Like Carter, I moved closer to someone who identified as gender-fluid, but unlike Carter, I did this with a student with whom I shared a class rather than a person about whom I read in a book. This movement around and in gender-fluid communities brought our classroom community closer together, at least in this moment in time, as evidenced by the “deeply personal stuff” people shared within. There was an evolving intimacy as we moved.

Moving around and in Trans Communities

In the second and third semesters of the class, like in the first, students read Kuklin’s (2014) Beyond Magenta. In these later two classes, though, students selected either Arin Andrews’s (2014) Some Assembly Required: The Not-So-Secret Life of a Transgender Teen or Katie Rain Hill’s (2014) Rethinking Normal: A Memoir in Transition to read alongside Beyond Magenta. The Andrews and Hill books are autobiographies of trans teens, the two of whom knew and dated each other, so they appear in each other’s books.

In an effort to facilitate students talking across the books, I created journal-entry prompts that applied to both books at similar stopping points in them. So, for example, in the section I focus on next, the writing prompt was about chapters 10–12 of both books. It read, “Arin Andrews and Katie Rain Hill describe their early transitions. What do they identify as the key components of their transitions? Why were these so important?” When students in the third-semester class talked about Arin’s transition, Abbot, one of two straight and cisgender young men in the class, immediately said “starting testosterone.” Next, the only gay man in the class, Khalil, said “therapy sessions.” Abbot spoke again, talking about Arin’s first day living publicly as a man, and Darren, the other straight and cis man, said just learning that trans people exist. Then Lisa named getting a binder, and I mentioned his getting a packer.

Across these comments, I heard students trying to connect with Arin. Abbot identified a characteristic they share: testosterone. Khalil was a young person who experimented extensively with gender both privately and publicly, both in his daily routine and onstage, during performances. It was quite likely that he knew that were he to transition, it would require therapy sessions. At the time of this conversation, I had not yet
learned that Lisa was grappling with her gender identity. By the end of the semester, I knew she was, but she had not asked me to use different names or pronouns. Therefore, it is certainly possible that at the time of this conversation she either had considered wearing or had worn or even was wearing a binder. I cannot know that. What I know is that is what stood out to her as a key component of Arin’s transition, and what I suspect is that she was connecting to Arin by naming that aloud in the class. As students reached out to connect with Arin, they moved closer to him and thus closer to trans communities.

When students in the second-semester class talked about the two books after having read them both, some of the cisgender students moved into trans-ally communities, and the only gender-fluid student moved to be in a trans community with Arin—again, just for moments in time. Yanika and Vic, for example, worried that Arin was hurt by Katie not just because she cheated on and broke up with him but also because she said, according to Yanika, “I need a real man!” Vic elaborated on this, saying, “That was kind of rude, and especially since, because I’m sure she might have experienced people not seeing her as a real woman, and that hurts, so it’s kind of wrong to, like, say, ‘I need a real man.’” Here, Yanika and Vic strove to be trans allies by reflecting on how Arin might experience transphobia, even that expressed by another transgender person, like Katie.

Mac, the only gender-fluid student in the class, took Katie’s comment more personally, more passionately. Mac said, “The ‘real man’ really made me mad, because he is a real man. Like, he doesn’t have [indecipherable] genitals, but he is a man, and I figure she would know, like, out of all people, she would know how that would feel. If he was like, ‘I need a real woman,’ I don’t think she’d react to that well. That kind of, like, she said that, I cringed. I’m like, ‘Oh no.’ He was destroyed; he was described as [indecipherable] destroyed.” Mac identified with Arin as a member of a trans community and recognized Katie as a traitor therein. Mac challenged themself to empathize with Katie, saying things like, “I will admit that she has helped him grow; she made him feel a lot safer with, you know, his vulnerabilities and body dysphoria. So that’s one thing.” Further, they readily admitted their bias for Arin, saying, “Arin’s kind of my baby right now; he’s kind of my child. . . . I just connect with him really, like, at a deep level.” In doing so, Mac further showed their location within a trans community—that is, Arin’s—reluctantly acknowledging Katie’s position there as well.
In these encounters, students drew on their past and present experiences—for example, with testosterone in the case of Abbot—and even their potential experiences—for example, with therapists in the case of Khalil or binders in the case of Lisa—to move close to trans communities as they engaged with Arin Andrews’s story. In doing so, they opened up possible futures for themselves, not that they would necessarily move into, but that they could imagine. Students also asserted positions close to one another in trans-ally communities by calling out the transphobic comment of a trans woman in the book we were reading. Their positionality was affirmed by another student, who did not stand with them in trans-ally communities but in a place of authority on the issue, as they identified as gender-fluid. From this location, Mac acknowledged the tensions within the trans community in they which found themself, at least for the time being.

School and Class Conversations

The school held a panel discussion on issues pertinent to trans people in the fall of 2015, toward the second half of the semester. The event was held in a large, open space, which held half of the student body. I attended the first of two sessions since that’s when the seniors attended and all of my students that term were seniors. The audience was facing the panel; to the audience’s right was a screen with a Twitter feed. Panelists comprised four students and two guests, all of whom appeared to be white. The principal and school counselor facilitated the event, starting with a rationale for the event. Next, all of the panelists introduced themselves. Both of the guests were doctoral students with whom I had worked, in various capacities, at a nearby university. One identified as a woman and the other identified as a trans man; the latter worked as a part-time counselor in the school. The students from the school included one senior and three sophomores. I later learned that they were volunteers from the school’s trans support group. The senior and one of the sophomores used he/him/his pronouns. One of the sophomores used she/her/hers pronouns, and the third sophomore used they/them/their pronouns. The audience applauded energetically after every introduction. Then, the school counselor stated directions for using the Twitter wall, and the principal asked the panel for a definition of transgender. The students pointed to the part-time counselor on the panel to answer, and he did; then the other guest
distinguished between *transgender* and *transsexual*. The principal asked what words not to use, and both students and guests responded. By the third question, about how it feels to be misgendered, students were taking the lead in responding. There was a question about the meaning of *cisgender* and a question about using they/them/their pronouns. When a question was asked about *queer* and *genderqueer*, the only genderqueer student started to reply but seemed to struggle. The part-time counselor helped and supported what they were saying.

I noticed that the audience was very attentive and quiet throughout. I also noticed that two of my students were sitting in front of me: Mac, who was gender-fluid, and Carter, who was a pansexual cisgender woman. They were clearly engaged, making comments to each other. Mac's leg was on Carter's leg. Carter's hand was in Mac's lap. I had shared class with these two for months and had never noticed their being physically affectionate with each other. I interpreted their actions as supportive, not as romantic. I don't think this panel was easy on Mac, in particular, but I think it meant a lot to them.

The Twitter wall started to come to life with directives and advice, like “Don't treat me like a trans* kid” and “Add 'queerfolk' to 'ladies and gentlemen.'” Then there were questions about how to disclose trans identities, how to ask about pronouns, what about bathrooms, and relationships to sexual identities. These continued after the panel, along with much praise, but panelists responded to some of the questions during the panel, particularly the ones about bathrooms and disclosing to parents. One audience member stood up and said, “Don't call me by my former name.” Another audience member asked how people reacted, and one student panelist replied saying she did not even notice people's reactions because she felt so confident in herself. As the principal invited final thoughts from the panelists, the bell rang, but the audience stayed seated until the speakers were done and the audience was excused. Mac and Carter asked me if we could discuss the panel in class the next day, and I agreed.

The next morning, I asked who attended the panel. Just over half had not. Mac said, “Is there any questions that anyone who didn't go to the panel had?” Students wanted to know how it was organized, who spoke, and how people responded. I said, “None of [the responses] felt, like, disruptive or rude,” but Mac said their friend was a panelist in the second session and he said that there was a “group of people that were kind of making a joke out of it.” A connection was made to the previous year's panel on race, which was discussed at length before I tried to conclude
the discussion. Then, one student asked about various pronouns, which we discussed for a bit. Katherine said she was glad that the school was “really good with pronouns,” and Mac said that they appreciated that the panelists “touched upon the fact that ‘they’ is, like, grammatically correct.”

The conversation then shifted from the panel to those of us in the room. Hilary wanted to know whether I knew the two panelists from the university and whether I knew they were trans. I explained that they both transitioned before I met them but that they had disclosed to me their trans history, one more privately than the other. Vic said it was easier for her when she met trans people after their transitions because she was less likely to get confused and misgender them. Yanika said she usually did not get people’s names wrong but she sometimes got people’s pronouns wrong. She said, “I always, like, apologize, but they still get mad at me. Some would say it’s all right.” She went on to explain, “Whenever, like, I apologize, I always do it, like, in private.” In this exchange the students, particularly Vic and Yanika, both of whom identified as cisgender women, moved cautiously but not comfortably near trans people. Mac moved themself near Vic and Yanika, saying, “I find that it’s a lot easier to do it, like—so, when my ex first came out to me as trans, it was a lot easier to switch the pronouns to, like, what he wanted over the text. And then when I talked to him, I’ve accidentally slipped up, and then like, ‘I’ve got to get better.’ . . . So I—I kind of understand.” Mac moved themself closer to trans people, particularly to their ex, than Vic and Yanika did, but not among them, at least not in this moment in time. All three of them moved themselves to be among trans allies, closer to trans people, as they struggled and strived, made themselves uncomfortable, did the work, apologized, and did more of the work.

Then, though, Mac shifted from telling a story about themself, using “I,” to using both “I” and “you.” Sometimes when they did this, I understood them to be merging “I” and “you,” so, for example, they said, “Because, like, over text you can just delete the message and be like, ‘Oh wait, that’s not right,’ and then fix it. But when you’re speaking it just comes out.” Here, when Mac used “you,” I believe they were speaking to their own experience but allowing for the possibility of other people having experienced something similar. Other times, though, I understood Mac to have used “I” in reference to themself and “you” in reference to Vic, Yanika, and other people learning to be trans allies. For example, Mac said, “And it’s like—you slip up; you’re human. As long as you know that it was a mistake and that you try, I feel like that’s what counts. Like it’s
still frustrating; that’s okay.” In doing so, Mac moved themself within and among trans communities but also near an understanding of trans allies. They moved from one to another with only shifts in language.

The panel and our discussion of it invited a broader understanding of trans people. I said, “What I heard on the panel was that [misgendering] hurts,” and Mac confirmed, “It does.” I recalled how one student panelist said she “didn’t want so much attention drawn to it. Like, she wanted—she said it just kind of exacerbated that the hurt came with it.” Vic recalled that another student panelist said, “Don’t put a big thing around him being trans. Just like—just treat him like a regular [guy]. . . . Like don’t make it a big deal; don’t be like, ‘Oh by the way he’s trans.’” I explained that the two guests from the university felt quite differently about being recognized as trans. I said, “[She] said, ‘I identify as a woman now because I’m done with my transitioning. The transition is complete. I don’t identify as a trans woman.’ Whereas I think [he] identifies as . . . more comfortably identifies as a man but in conversation will identify as [a] trans man.” Thus, we talked about some of the gender diversity within trans communities. Mac added to our understanding of the diversity of trans communities in this interaction, toward the end of the conversation:

YANIKA: So was [the panel], like, beneficial? Was it, like, good?

MAC: I—I feel like it was. I was really worried they wouldn’t bring up gender-fluid.

DR. B.: There was a lot of talk with fluidity.

MAC: I was really worried that they wouldn’t do it.

DR. B.: Yeah, but they did.

MAC: I was happy about it.

Whereas Vic, Yanika, and I moved ourselves toward and among trans-ally communities as we came to understand some of the complexity of trans communities, Mac moved themself toward and within trans communities, thus contributing to their diversity. These movements drew upon our past and present experiences, but they also projected toward a future in which
we could exist in and among trans-ally and trans communities with a knowledge of and respect for diversity among them.

Masculine Men

Not everyone was moving toward trans-ally and trans communities, though. Consider John, for example. John was a white, cisgender, straight young man. Very early in our course, I assigned the “Heteronormativity Scavenger Hunt” as homework. (This activity was shared by Summer Pennell. For more about it, read Blackburn & Pennell, 2018.) Everyone did the homework, and almost everyone completed it. For this assignment, John identified gender-defined bathrooms as an example of heteronormativity, and he identified “unisex bathrooms” as a potential disruption. He acknowledged gender-defined bathrooms as existing in schools and that they might make queer people “uncomfortable.” But when it came to the final question—“What can you do to make these places more friendly [for queer people]?”—he did not answer. I wrote, “Think on this one, [John]. It’s the whole point of the assignment. Push yourself.” He wasn’t moving.

Shortly thereafter, the class talked about how Walt Whitman’s “America” failed to include women in any substantial way. So, when the students created their own version of the poem, most people used they/them/their pronouns and other words to avoid gendering their contributions. Only two people gendered their contributions as from men (and none as from women). One of those two people was John. Later, when there was a school panel on issues pertinent to trans people, John was at school but elected not to attend the panel. I saw him sitting outside of the school, under a tree. The next day, when we discussed the panel, even when Mac explicitly asked whether people who were not present had any questions, John said nothing. In these ways, I saw John remaining quite distant from trans people and trans allies.

Not only did John distance himself from trans people and trans allies, he stood firmly as a masculine man. This was evident when I asked students to brainstorm two lists of characteristics—one for how men are described in the United States and another for how women are. Here, I was again working with an activity I had recently been taught by Summer Pennell (for more on this, read Blackburn & Pennell, 2018). I led this activity at the start of a unit on memoir, in which we would
read *Beyond Magenta* as a class and either *Rethinking Normal* or *Some Assembly Required* independently, because these texts disrupt gender in various ways. The activity was in this way aligned. To start the activity, I typed the lists as they offered ideas (see table 1).

Once they developed the lists, I instructed students to stand all the way toward one end of the room or the other if “all of those things, every single one of those descriptions . . . hold true for you.” I explained, “If it’s somewhere in between, you decide where. Stand somewhere in between.” Students moved between the two points, and I asked them why they stood where they stood. Most students stood “somewhere in between” and explained how they exhibited some characteristics from one list and others from the other. Some of the characteristics were on both lists as opposites. For example, Mac said, “I do feel like I have to protect people, but it’s like a mutual thing, where I protect you and you protect me.”

John, however, stood out in that he stood all the way over to the “men” side. I said, “John, you are so far over you’re almost beyond,” and then proceeded to ask him about most of the items on the list:

> Dr. B.: So, you don’t think you should cry or be emotional?

> John: No.

Table 1. Chart created in the fall 2015 class to characterize traits typically associated with men and women

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How Men Are Described in Our Society</th>
<th>How Women Are Described in Our Society</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shouldn’t cry or be emotional</td>
<td>Need to be protected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protectors of women</td>
<td>Really emotional, moody</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Big, strong, weight lifting</td>
<td>Delicate, dainty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaders</td>
<td>Not physically strong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not as clean, don’t care about</td>
<td>Dream of the long white dress, tiered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>physical appearance as much</td>
<td>cake, wedding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pay for dates</td>
<td>Child responsibilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Propose marriage, initiate dates</td>
<td>Helpers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Dr. B.: Really?

John: I almost never cry. It’s been about three years.

Dr. B.: Aww. Okay, do you feel like you need to protect women?

John: Yeah.

Dr. B.: Do you weight lift? Lift weights?

John: Yeah.

Dr. B.: You don’t care about your physical appearance?

John: Not at all.

[laughter]

Dr. B.: You pay for dates?

John: Yeah.

Dr. B.: You initiate dates?

John: Mhm.

Dr. B.: All right. Then you get to stand all the way over there.

He fully claimed everything generated on the list of descriptors of men. And despite multiple invitations to switch locations, offered to the class as a whole, John never moved.

I was so struck by his rejection of anything beyond the masculine that I spoke directly to him as I transitioned the class from the gender-line activity to a discussion of the early chapters in the Hill and Andrews books. I said, “I’m hoping that, um, by—it will be interesting, [John], to see how it will play out for you. Um, but I’m hoping that by playing with these ideas some, that you will be able to identify with characters we’re reading about and kind of reflect on your own way of being, um, in between or not, and how it connects with the characters.” I knew that I would be
asking students to move between their current gendered communities and those of the people we would be reading about and discussing. I could see the potential in most students to move within and among gendered communities, but I could not see it in John. I saw a rigidity, perhaps even a defensiveness. John seemed to stand firmly as a masculine man.

This is not to stay that a masculine identity is not a viable one, for a man or anyone else. It certainly is. Regrettably, I seemed to dismiss that possibility in my reactions to John during this activity. I believe I was worried that a man who clung so fervently to his masculinity would not identify with trans characters like Katie Rain Hill and Arin Andrews and, much more importantly, would not move toward trans-ally communities. And, in fact, I saw no evidence of such movement in this student, no push, no pull, just a digging in of the heels, of his heels.

Not only did I see no movement in the present discussion of gender, I saw no evidence of a history of movement of John having gotten to this place in terms of gender, and, just as importantly, I saw no indication of any potential movement in terms of gender. In fact, Ahmed talks about needing to be able to see where one might go next in order to move to get there, but even being about to see something new requires some sort of movement, and here I saw none at all. These are the stances I experience as unethical.

**Ethical Movement with Respect to Gender Diversity in Classroom Encounters**

Although not all students moved toward trans-ally and trans communities, many of them did, at least in some moments in time. As they discussed fiction and nonfiction literature and students’ lives, including but not limited to their own, students moved around and in trans-ally and trans communities, including gender-fluid communities. They showed agility. At times, when they encountered peers or characters unlike themselves, they kept distant, deciphering instead of empathizing. This could have resulted in a sort of ossification. But when they moved closer, something gave in those encounters. The movement was fraught with struggle, but when it happened it was movement with consequence, where students came to understand one another and themselves with more complexity and nuance. They connected. Again, they exhibited some agility. This makes an encounter ethical. Not that it was easy or comfortable, but that it was work, and that it mattered.