

Transforming the Curriculum:
The Inclusion of the Experiences of Trans People
Genny Beemyn

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People who would be referred to today as transgender, transsexual, and gender-nonconforming—trans people, in contemporary popular terminology—have not only been left out of history, but have been given no place to exist in history, which is constructed as the experiences of women and men. To the extent that individuals who cross-dressed or who lived as a gender different from the one assigned to them at birth have been considered in historical texts, it has generally been to dismiss them as masqueraders, oddities, or degenerates. Female-bodied individuals who presented as men, for example, have been said by historians to have done so because they were seeking male privilege at a time when women had little ability to live independently or, more recently, have been said by lesbian and gay historians to have done so because they wanted to pursue same-sex sexual relationships. The possibility that they may have cross-dressed or lived cross-gendered lives as an end in itself is rarely considered. Of course, we rarely have evidence of the subjectivity of people who crossed gender lines in the past, which makes teaching trans history particularly challenging. But raising questions about how we

understand gender-nonconforming people historically allows for a more nuanced analysis of the construction of gender and gender systems over time.

Conceptualizing trans history

While it is problematic that historians have often failed to acknowledge or accept individuals who cross-dressed or who lived as a gender different from the one assigned to them at birth, it would also be inappropriate to assume that “trans people,” as we currently understand the term, existed throughout history. Given that “trans” is a contemporary concept, individuals in past centuries who might appear to be trans or gender-nonconforming from our vantage point would quite likely not have conceptualized their lives in such a way. But, at the same time, limiting trans history to people who lived at a time and place when the concept of “trans” was available and used by the individuals in question would deny the experiences of many people who would have been perceived as gender nonconforming in their eras and cultures.

Students should be introduced to these arguments so that they recognize that seemingly gender-nonconforming individuals in history cannot be claimed non-problematically as “transgender people,” “transsexuals,” or “cross-dressers,” if these categories were not yet named or embraced. Students should also be alerted to the difference between individuals whose actions would seem to indicate that they would be what we would call “trans” today and those who might have presented as a gender different from the one assigned to them at birth for reasons other than a sense of gender difference (such as to escape narrow gender roles or pursue same-sex sexual relationships). While someone’s motivations for gender nonconformity are not always simple and clear, it is important to try to make these distinctions in order to delineate a specific “transgender history.”¹

An example that demonstrates the usefulness of making these types of distinctions is the case of Hannah Snell/James Gray. According to a 1750 biography, Snell, a resident of Worcester, England, began dressing as a man in 1745 to search for her husband, a Dutch sailor who had deserted her while she was pregnant with their first child.² For the next five years, Snell served under the name of James Gray in both the British navy and army, working variously as a servant, watchman, and deckhand aboard ship. After learning from another sailor that her husband had been executed for murder, Snell/Gray returned to England, at which point she disclosed her assigned gender to her shocked but ultimately supportive shipmates. The “female soldier” became a sensation after her story was published, and Snell/Gray took advantage of her fame to earn an income by appearing on the stage in her military uniform. Upon retiring from performing, Snell/Gray continued to wear traditionally male apparel and purchased a “public house . . . for which [she] had a signboard painted with a British tar on one side and a brave marine on the other, while beneath was inscribed: The Widow in Masquerade or the Female Warrior.”³ Although Snell/Gray initially had little choice but to present as male in order to look for her husband, she seems to be someone whom we would refer to today as a cross-dresser because she continued to cross-dress after the ostensible reason disappeared. [This is an example of the kind of story, from the perspective of the British background of many early American colonists, that illustrates the complexity of gender in that time period.](#)

Along with the difficulty of knowing someone’s motivations for gender nonconformity, another challenge in constructing trans history that should be pointed out to students is the relatively limited amount of source material available, because gender nonconformity was frequently not documented and, if someone was successful in presenting as a member of a different gender, they would not be known to history. For example, a number of female-assigned

individuals were discovered to be living as men only when their bodies were examined following an injury or death. Some students may have heard of Billy Tipton, a jazz musician who lived as a man for more than fifty years and who was not known to have been assigned female until his death in 1989.⁴

Tipton's case drew widespread attention because he lived in more contemporary times, but his experiences were far from unique in earlier centuries. Similar circumstances surround Murray Hall, a female-assigned individual who lived as a man for the last thirty years of the nineteenth century. He became a prominent New York City politician, operated a commercial "intelligence office," and married twice. Like Tipton, Murray was not discovered to have been assigned female until his death in 1901 from breast cancer, for which he had avoided medical treatment for several years, seemingly out of fear of disclosure. His wives apparently were aware of Hall's secret and respected how he expressed his gender. No one else knew, including the daughter he raised, and his friends and colleagues were shocked at the revelation. While some officials and a coroner's jury subsequently chose to see Hall as female, his daughter, friends, and political colleagues continued to recognize him as a man. Said an aide to a New York State Senator, "If he was a woman he ought to have been born a man, for he lived and looked like one."⁵

Early U.S. trans history

As Thomas Foster's essay in this volume points out, historical evidence exists to show that many indigenous cultures in North America recognized nonbinary genders. From the outset of their arrival in the Americas in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Europeans reported on the visibility of individuals who adopted cross-gender roles, including having sexual relations

with and marrying people of the same birth gender assignment. Within their respective societies, individuals who took on different gender roles were viewed as neither men nor women, but as additional genders that either combined male and female elements or existed completely apart from binary gender categories. Thus partnerships between cross-gendered and non-cross-gendered individuals of the same birth gender assignment were considered to be what anthropologist Sabine Lang calls “hetero-gender” relationships and not same-sex sexual relationships, as many Europeans, and later European Americans, believed.⁶

Learning about the traditional gender belief systems of Native American societies can help students better understand the complexities of gender—that different cultures constructed gender in different ways and that gender cannot be reduced to genitalia. In addition, by seeing how some white cultural outsiders ~~had~~ read gender very differently from the Native Americans themselves, students can recognize the unintentional biases that we all bring to studies of cultures and times different from our own. This history can also be used as an example of the deep cultural conflicts that arose between Native American people and European and U.S. settlers.

The acceptance of nonbinary genders in some Native American societies stands in contrast to the general lack of recognition within the white-dominated American colonies in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, despite the fact that, as the Hannah Snell/James Gray story makes clear, secret gender-crossing existed in European societies. To the extent that individuals who cross-dressed or who lived as a gender different from the one assigned to them at birth were acknowledged in the colonies, it was largely to condemn their behavior as unnatural and sinful. For example, the charges filed in Middlesex County, Massachusetts, in 1692 against a female-

assigned individual named Mary Henly for wearing “men’s clothing” stated that such behavior was “seeming to confound the course of nature.”⁷

Given the illegality and the social stigma faced by individuals who assumed different genders in many areas of what would become the United States, relatively few instances of gender nonconformity are documented in the colonial and revolutionary periods. Perhaps most famous is the case of Deborah Sampson, who joined the Continental Army and fought in the American Revolution.⁸ More is known beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, as a growing number of single people left their communities of origin to earn a living, gain greater freedom, or simply see the world. Able to take advantage of the anonymity afforded by new surroundings, these migrants had greater opportunities to fashion their own lives, which included presenting as a gender different from the one assigned to them at birth. [This is part of the story of geographical mobility, so central to U.S. history.](#)

Some headed to the West, where, according to historian Peter Boag, “cross-dressers were not simply ubiquitous, but were very much a part of daily life on the frontier.” Among these individuals was Sammy Williams, a lumberjack and cook for nearly two decades in Montana logging camps in the late nineteenth century, who was only discovered to have been assigned female when his body was examined upon his death.⁹ Such examples can challenge students’ perceptions of the Old West as primarily the domain of “manly men” and their assumption that gender transgression was limited or non-existent in rigidly gendered settings. For it was not in spite of but because frontier societies were coded as places “where men are men” that cross-dressing, particularly among female-assigned individuals, could be so prevalent. A female-assigned individuals who could present as a masculine man would unquestionably be seen as a man. Historians have long noted that homosocial environments [such as like](#) frontier communities

facilitated same-sex sexual relationships; the nature of these environments likewise enabled individuals to live cross-gendered lives.¹⁰

Individuals who presented as a gender different from the one assigned to them at birth also moved from rural to urban areas, often to pursue wage labor. In the same way that the growth of cities in the nineteenth century made it possible for individuals who pursued same-sex sexual relationships to create their own cultures, similar circumstances likely benefited individuals who lived cross-gendered lives, enabling them to meet and socialize with others like themselves. Not that the two groups were entirely separate from each other; there was significant overlap between the communities, and together they created and frequented some of the same social spaces.¹¹

Given the prevalence of the stereotype that all trans people are gay, it is important in teaching trans history to make distinctions, where possible, between the two groups while noting the substantial commonalities and the instances of shared history. One such place of intersection was masquerade balls, or “drags,” as they were commonly known. Adapting the tradition of costume balls from the larger society, individuals who might be referred to today as gay men, transsexual women, and female-presenting cross-dressers all began to organize and participate in drags in large U.S. cities in the late nineteenth century.¹² By the 1920s, drag balls began to attract thousands of participants and onlookers—many of whom were African American—and received significant and sometimes surprisingly positive coverage in the Black press. For example, in a 1934 story on Harlem’s Hamilton Lodge ball, the country’s largest drag event, the reporter for the *Amsterdam News* weighed in on his choices for the best-dressed participants, among them “a dreamy looking creature arrayed in a carnival outfit of rhinestones and a jeweled star-pointed crown.” He described some of the others as “stunning,” “cute,” “attractive,” and “smart[ly]”

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dressed.¹³ Teaching about the popularity and visibility of drags can serve to challenge students' assumption that most trans and gay people were in the closet and lacked self-pride prior to ~~the~~ Stonewall ~~Riots~~. This history can also be included in material on the effects of urbanization to provide students with a fuller picture of late nineteenth-century gender norms and leisure activities in the U.S. (see also Red Vaughan Tremmel's essay in this volume).

The classification of trans people and the rise of a movement

Another place of intersection between same-sex sexual communities and cross-gendered communities was in how those who first studied sex failed to differentiate between them. Medical professionals and researchers in Europe and the United States began to focus on cross-gendered identities in the late nineteenth century in response to the growing visibility of urban communities of people who lived at least part-time as a gender different from that assigned to them. These sexologists considered such individuals to be “gender inverts”—that is, to have a gender the opposite of or inverted from what was expected. Included in this group were individuals whose primary expression of inversion was considered to be their attraction to others of the same sex and gender. Not until the turn of the twentieth century did sexologists begin to separate sexual identity from gender identity and recognize that individuals who transgressed gender norms were not necessarily what they described as “homosexuals.”

The central figure in developing the concept of gender identity was German sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld, who coined and popularized the term “transvestism” (Latin for cross-dressing) ~~in~~~~with~~ his 1910 book *The Transvestites*. Hirschfeld argued that transvestites were not fetishists, but were overcome with a “feeling of peace, security and exaltation, happiness and well-being . . . when in the clothing of the other sex.”¹⁴ Challenging the claim by other

sexologists that transvestites were homosexuals and almost always men, Hirschfeld demonstrated that transvestites could be male or female and of any sexual orientation. He did not, however, distinguish between people who cross-dressed but identified as the gender assigned to them at birth (“transvestites,” now referred to as “cross-dressers”) and people who identified as a gender different from their assigned gender and who lived cross-gendered lives, which included cross-dressing.

The latter group began to be categorized as “transsexuals” in the medical literature in the late 1940s and early 1950s, largely through the work of U.S. endocrinologist Harry Benjamin. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Benjamin recognized that psychotherapy could not change someone’s inner sense of gender and therefore advocated that transsexual individuals be given access to hormones and gender-affirming surgeries to bring their bodies into harmony with their minds. As more and more transsexual individuals became known and studied, Benjamin’s position gained greater acceptance, and the dominant medical view gradually began to shift to today’s understanding: that gender identity and not biological sex is the critical element of someone’s gender and is immutable. Providing students with this history enables them to better grasp the concept of gender and how it developed and to recognize that individuals who became known as “transsexual” existed well before the medical processes for transitioning were developed.¹⁵

The concept of transsexuality entered Western popular discourse in 1952, when Christine Jorgensen made headlines around the world for being the first person from the U.S. widely known to have undergone a “sex change.” Most students today would be astounded to learn that someone would become internationally famous simply for altering her appearance through

electrolysis, hormones, and surgeries. This surprising historical moment can provide an interesting and useful entrée into teaching about the U.S. in the mid twentieth century.

Part of the reason Jorgensen became such a sensation was her dramatic transformation: a U.S. serviceman, the epitome of masculinity in post-World War II America, was reborn [as into](#) a “blonde bombshell,” the symbol of 1950s white feminine sexiness. Her popularity also reflected the public’s fascination with the power of science in the mid-twentieth century. A tidal wave of remarkable inventions—from television and the transistor to the atomic bomb—had made scientists in the 1950s seem capable of anything, so why not the ability to turn a man into a woman? However, in the aftermath of the first use of nuclear weapons, Jorgensen’s “sex change” was also pointed to as evidence that science had gone too far in its efforts to alter the natural environment. Jorgensen thus served as a symbol for both scientific progress and a fear that science was attempting to play God.¹⁶

Another way that trans history can be incorporated into U.S. history courses is through including trans activism as part of an examination of movements for civil rights [in the postwar period and beyond](#). Transsexual individuals began to organize in the late 1960s to assist others in finding support and gaining access to services, but most of these efforts were small and short-lived. More successful were spontaneous acts of resistance by trans individuals to harassment and police brutality. Most famous were the 1969 Stonewall Riots in New York City, which have become legendary as the start of LGBT militancy and the birthplace of the LGBT liberation movement. However, as Susan Stryker [points out describes](#) in her book *Transgender History*, Stonewall was not a unique event, but the culmination of more than a decade of militant opposition by poor and working-class LGBT people to discriminatory treatment and police brutality. She recounts two conflicts with the police that, until recently, were largely unknown: a

May 1959 confrontation at Cooper's Donuts in Los Angeles and an August 1966 confrontation at Compton's Cafeteria in San Francisco. In both cases, young drag queens, many of whom were Latino/a or African American, fought back when harassed by police officers. "Back then we were beat up by the police, by everybody," remembers Sylvia Rivera, a Puerto Rican trans woman who was a leader in the Stonewall Riots. "You get tired of being just pushed around."¹⁷ Teaching this history of trans resistance can serve as an important corrective to the popular belief that LGBT people did not become militant until the Stonewall Riots, as well as address the common erasure of trans people from involvement in Stonewall itself.

A large-scale trans rights movement began to develop in the 1990s, facilitated by the growing use of the term "transgender" to encompass all individuals whose gender identity or expression differs from the social norms of the gender assigned to them at birth. This understanding of "transgender" became most strongly associated with socialist writer and activist Leslie Feinberg, who called on all people who face discrimination for not conforming to gender norms to organize around their shared oppression. The expansive meaning of the term was further popularized by writers such as Kate Bornstein and Martine Rothblatt, and this usage became commonplace by the late 1990s.¹⁸

At the same time, many younger trans people who described themselves as "genderqueer" began challenging the dominant trans paradigm—that individuals recognize themselves as the "opposite" gender and start to identify and present as that gender. Refusing to accept a gender binary, genderqueer individuals do not feel that they have to transition completely or at all. Instead, they may blend or bend gender in appearance, dress, and/or expression, which may include wanting to be referred to by gender-inclusive pronouns. Genderqueer individuals use a wide variety of terms to characterize their gender and sexual

identities, including “third gendered,” “bi gendered,” “non gendered,” “gender blender,” “boygirl,” “trannyboi,” and “androgynous.”¹⁹

The importance of transgender history

More and more people are coming out publicly as trans at the outset of the twenty-first century and often doing so at younger and younger ages, due to information and support being more readily available through web sites, social media, and, in many places, local trans and trans-supportive youth groups. It is becoming increasingly common today for high school, junior high, and even elementary school students to be open with their friends and family about their trans identities and to express these identities in a myriad of ways. As a result, trans communities are not only expanding in size, but also becoming more diverse and more visible.

The growing number of students openly identifying as trans means that it is even more important not to assume that everyone in the classroom is cisgender (that is, non-transgender) or fits gender norms. Both faculty and students should respect the gender identity and expression of trans individuals by using the names and pronouns that they request be used and by avoiding language that reinforces a gender binary. But to be truly inclusive, the content of history courses must also recognize gender diversity, and not only by including lessons that consider gender issues and trans people. Just as we do not presume that everyone in history was white, male, and Christian, we cannot take for granted that everyone identified as women or men.

Teaching about trans people and being trans-inclusive in the classroom can help trans students feel more welcomed at school and increase support on the part of cisgender students. The growing visibility of gender-nonconforming people in society is also likely to lead to greater support, as many cisgender people will find that individuals they care about—friends, co-workers, and family members—are trans. In the last two decades, trans activists and allies in the

United States have succeeded in having trans-supportive laws and policies enacted by a growing number of states, municipalities, schools, and corporations; the years ahead should see even more progress made toward the recognition and full inclusion of people of all genders.

Notes

¹ For more on making this distinction, see Genny Beemyn, “Transgender History,” in *Trans Bodies, Trans Selves*, edited by Laura Erickson-Schroth (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

² Anonymous, *The Female Soldier; or, the Surprising Life and Adventures of Hannah Snell* (Los Angeles: William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, 1989 [1750]).

³ C. J. S. Thompson, *The Mysteries of Sex: Women Who Posed as Men and Men Who Impersonated Women* (New York: Causeway Books, 1974), 105.

⁴ Diane Wood Middlebrook, *Suits Me: The Double Life of Billy Tipton* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1998).

⁵ Jason Cromwell, *Transmen and FTMs: Identities, Bodies, Genders, and Sexualities* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 77; Jonathan Ned Katz, *Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the U.S.A.* (New York: T.Y. Crowell), 234.

⁶ Sabine Lang, *Men as Women, Women as Men: Changing Gender in Native American Cultures* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), 210.

⁷ Elizabeth Reis, “Hermaphrodites and ‘Same-Sex’ Sex in Early America,” in *Long Before Stonewall: Histories of Same-Sex Sexuality in Early America*, edited by Thomas A. Foster (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 152.

⁸ Leila J. Rupp, *A Desired Past: A Short History of Same-Sex Love in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 28.

⁹ Peter Boag, *Re-Dressing America’s Frontier Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 1-2, 31-32.

¹¹ Susan Stryker, *Transgender History* (Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2008), 33.

¹² George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 292-93.

¹³ Edgar T. Rouzeau, "Snow and Ice Cover Streets as Pansies Blossom Out at Hamilton Lodge's Dance," *Amsterdam News*, February 28, 1934, 1-2.

¹⁴ Magnus Hirschfeld, *Transvestites: The Erotic Drive to Cross Dress*, trans. Michael A. Lombardi-Nash (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1991), 125.

¹⁵ Harry Benjamin, *The Transsexual Phenomenon* (New York: Julian Press, 1966); and Joanne Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 6.

¹⁶ Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed*, 62.

¹⁷ Stryker, *Transgender History*, 60-61, 65; and Leslie Feinberg, *Trans Liberation: Beyond Pink or Blue* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), 107-08.

¹⁸ Leslie Feinberg, *Transgender Liberation: A Movement Whose Time Has Come* (New York: World View Forum, 1992); Feinberg, *Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to RuPaul* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996); Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women and the Rest of Us* (New York: Routledge, 1994); and Martine Rothblatt, *The Apartheid of Sex: A Manifesto on the Freedom of Gender* (New York: Crown, 1994).

¹⁹ Sue Rankin and Genny Beemyn, "Beyond a Binary: The Lives of Gender-Nonconforming Youth," *About Campus* 17 (2012): 2-10.