

## Crossing the Road, or What's a Nice Lesbian Feminist Like You Doing in a Place Like This?

*This narrative follows the author's journey in teaching Leslie Feinberg's Stone Butch Blues and teaching about the death of Brandon Teena, a person born biologically female but who lived a chosen male identity and who was murdered in Nebraska for that choice. Through reading, class discussion, student journals, and especially events such as the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, speeches by transgender activists, and a rally in support of Brandon Teena, the author moves in her teaching from "add transgender and stir" to a conceptual framework which affects the way she sees everything. Her teaching transforms her.*

by  
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Even when I am reluctant to follow, my teaching leads me to the places I need to go. One sunny day in the summer of 1994 I found myself leaving the grounds of the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival and crossing the county road to "Camp Trans," a camp of transgender people and their allies who were there to protest the Festival's exclusion of transsexual women. I was keenly aware of the wrist-band that a worker had put around my wrist when I entered the Festival, the sign that would also allow me back in. I didn't want to cross the road, to acknowledge the privilege that separated me from those who were on the other side, because I knew it would entail some deep and difficult changes, but my teaching compelled me.

The camp had been there the year before too, but I had ignored it. A sign read "Honk if you support Camp Trans," but I didn't honk or look. Aware of the controversy over transsexuals not being allowed into the Festival, I supported the producers' stance that only

"womyn-born-womyn" were allowed, excluding transsexual women. I had followed the debate in the national lesbian press, but I remained unmoved, sure in my identity politics that I knew what both "woman" and "lesbian" meant. I agreed with the argument that male to female transsexuals had been socialized as males, and therefore would still be male in some immutable way. But this year when we were in line waiting to enter the Festival, a woman handed me a flyer from Camp Trans which announced that both Leslie Feinberg and Minnie Bruce Pratt were going to be there, and I knew I would have to be there too.

A week after I returned from the Festival I would be teaching a new course I had designed, "20th Century Lesbian Writers." The final book on the syllabus was Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues*. When I read the book for the first time, I was stunned beyond what I had expected. I found Feinberg's depiction of Jess' life as someone whom others could not definitively identify as male or female



powerful and moving. And I was chagrined to recognize some of my own views in those of the lesbian feminists who reject Jess and Theresa for being too butch and femme, who see them as imitating heterosexuality and thus not being worthy of inclusion in the lesbian feminist community. I felt it was important to teach the book, which challenged some of my long-held beliefs, and it was important for me to meet Leslie Feinberg.

I had learned much from reading and teaching the work of Minnie Bruce Pratt as well. I found her work so important that I had invited her to speak in Lincoln three years before; she had given a powerful reading and had provoked much thought among the people I knew. Since Minnie Bruce was a lesbian feminist who had helped me think about how a white woman could do anti-racist work, I knew that if she was thinking about transgender issues, I needed to think about them, and that she could help me see what it was I had to do.

I knew I had to visit Camp Trans if I were to teach *Stone Butch Blues* as responsibly as I could.

On the announced day, I walked out to Camp Trans,

about a mile walk from our campsite. I could have taken the festival shuttle, but it seemed important to walk. I took some of the less traveled paths through the woods. Some I hadn't been on for years, since my first days at the festival, and some I had never been on. I was very conscious of *leaving* the festival, *crossing* the dirt county road to enter Camp Trans. I was also aware that my wristband allowed me to re-enter the festival, while many of the women I met at Camp Trans wouldn't have that privilege. I felt awkward and a little nervous. People were sitting around a campfire eating breakfast, and offered me porridge. Some people introduced themselves or introduced other people to me. I spotted Minnie Bruce off talking with some folks, but was too shy to remind her that I had met her in Lincoln in 1991. Finally, after what seemed like a long time, people moved toward the workshop tent, and Minnie Bruce began to speak. She spoke of her new understanding of transgender and read from her upcoming book, *S/HE*. As with her lesbian and antiracist writing, she used a new lens to look back over her life, this time a transgender lens. In *S/HE*, Pratt writes of "the deep fear in the

larger culture, and therefore within ourselves, about sex and gender fluidity," that "every aspect of a person's gender expression and sex will not be consistently either masculine or feminine, man or woman" (pp. 20-21).

While Minnie Bruce was reading, I recognized Leslie Feinberg sitting in the audience. Several times she got up and left, returning a few minutes later. When Minnie Bruce was done, Leslie said, "I'm sorry to tell you this publicly, but we'll have to change our plane reservations and take another flight because we've been told we can enter the festival." She explained that several members of Camp Trans had been meeting with festival staff, and while at first they were told that transsexuals could not enter, later they were told that each woman entering the festival could decide if the "womyn-born-womyn" policy was applicable to her. So a number of women, including some transsexuals, were going to pay the fee and enter the festival. There was a great feeling of excitement, of herstory being made. I felt privileged to be there, but I still felt confused and not part of this community. What did it mean to me as a lesbian feminist to have transsexuals cross the road in the other direction and enter the festival?

When I returned home, my story of "crossing the road" to enter Camp Trans emerged as the most important part of the festival for me. I told the story over and over to friends, trying to find its meaning for myself as





well. I discussed it with friends who worked at the festival and firmly supported the producers' original stance. What for me was exciting and potentially life-changing for them was a betrayal. But I was unclear about many things. When I read that a pre-operative transsexual woman had entered the festival I also felt betrayed. Where would it stop? Could we have all-women gatherings anymore? If a penis wasn't the divider between man and woman, what was?

But I was also plunged immediately into my teaching, which included the first-time teaching of "20th Century Lesbian Writers." The reading list included two stories of transgender people, Feinberg's novel *Stone Butch Blues* and an in-depth journalistic story about the murder of Teena Brandon, a transgender person killed on December 31, 1993 in a rural farmhouse in Humboldt, Nebraska, about 100 miles from Lincoln, where I live and teach. (I use the name "Teena Brandon" and "she" to indicate my understanding at the time; soon I understood that out of respect for his chosen and lived identity, I should use "Brandon Teena" and "he.") In local newspaper articles Brandon was repeatedly described as a woman who "posed as a man" to date women in the local area. The two men suspected of the murder had raped Teena the week before, but although she reported the rape to the police and named her assailants, the two men had not been picked up. The sheriff's quotes make it

clear that he believed that anyone who would "lie" about her sex couldn't be trusted to tell the truth about other things. Sheriff Charles Laux stated: "What kind of person was she? The first few times we arrested her she was putting herself off as a guy. We were trying to figure out when she was telling the truth and when she wasn't" (Minkowitz, 1994, p. 25). The night of the rape these two men had pulled down Teena's pants in front of someone Brandon was dating, to show her that the person she was dating was a female, not a male.

As I began to realize but still not fully understand the importance of this event, I collected all of the articles about it which appeared in the local paper and those that began to appear in the national press. A *Village Voice* article quoted a student in a queer theory course at the University of Nebraska, where I teach. The student said they hadn't discussed Brandon's death in class; the writer of the article implicitly placed a negative judgment on the teacher for not doing so (Minkowitz, 1994, p. 28).

Meanwhile, local activists didn't organize around Brandon's death. There seemed to be some confusion even among ourselves over "what she was." People who knew Brandon claimed that she did not identify as a lesbian and didn't like lesbians. A man who knew Brandon in high school and who was at the time of the murders director of the campus Gay and Lesbian Resource Center stated, "She said she was disgusted by

lesbians, that she didn't think it was right.' He said Brandon told him, 'It's not okay for me to love women as a woman. I have to be a man if I'm going to love women'" (Minkowitz, 1994, p. 28). A January 4, 1994 article in the *Lincoln Journal* had the headline "Friend says victim planned sex change" and the sub-heading "Lincoln woman believes Brandon was killed for cross-dressing." In it, Jo Ann Fleming, who "took Brandon into her home for a few months in early 1992," told reporters: "Teena Brandon was a transsexual who had been encouraged by mental health experts to dress and live as a man in preparation for undergoing sex change surgery" (Stoddard & Duggan, 1994, p. 10). The alternate use of "cross-dresser" and "transsexual" in the headlines and the article, as if they are the same thing, shows confusion and a lack of knowledge among the media as well as local people. I knew of no group in Lincoln which considered Brandon part of them and which organized any actions against her death.

Two weeks later, however, on January 17, 1994, I received on email an article from the Workers World Service which gave a transgender analysis of Brandon's murder; the article quoted Leslie Feinberg saying: "This is the kind of terror and brutality that so many transgendered people, lesbians and gay men face in rural and urban areas. . . . It will take the strength of a united movement to push back the wave of violence and discrimination. And



that's just what we're building." At the time, I was impressed that national activists were paying attention to this Nebraska murder, but that was as far as my response went. I did not "get" the difference between the transgender analysis and the confused statements in the local papers. I did vow, though, that I would teach about Teena Brandon's murder in my Lesbian Writers class by using the *Village Voice* article and by having a student do a report on the local press coverage. My motives were mixed—I did not want my students quoted in a national publication saying we had ignored this transgender violence in our own back yard; yet I was also following my lesbian feminist principles that all oppression is connected and violence against one is violence against us all.

In the Lesbian Writers class, we tried to define "lesbian" the first class period and returned to those first-night definitions again and again throughout the class as the books we read complicated issues of identity and identification in ways we hadn't foreseen. During the semester, through our reading of *Stone Butch Blues* and the articles about Teena Brandon, we also grappled with what was for all of us a new concept, transgender identity, which challenged our most fundamental thinking about gender. The excerpts from students' final journals below, which are a reflection of our reading, class discussion, student journals, and my written responses to journals, show that we were

reaching out to an expanded vision of gender. (All student journal entries in this paper are used with author's permission.)

I was glad we explored this issue. . . . I also liked the idea that lesbians and transgendered people were not the same thing. Being transgendered like being lesbian is a far more complicated issue than object choice. Teena Brandon spoke of that—she loved women as a man would love women, not as a woman would love other women.

(Tami Davidson)

I am not about to attempt an unraveling of the multiple possibilities as to why, how, when, or where Brandon came to create the identity she lived by. This lack of understanding on my part represents my own limitations for imagining new ways of constructing one's identity. . . . Brandon's story testified that strict boundaries are still being drawn as to what one can be, how one can express oneself, and that those who push past these boundaries or speak out against them are in a situation of real personal jeopardy to the extreme of death.

(Thelma Ross)

Feinberg's characters suggest that broadening the definition of lesbian is not enough, that people exist who defy definition altogether. The whole process of defining is exclusionary, and in practice definitional structures tend to make people "unreal." The movement from (Radclyffe) Hall to Feinberg is a movement from

questioning aspects of dominant culture to questioning our entire understanding of reality.

(John Chapin)

Still, I am surprised in looking back to see that I could not yet make a paradigm shift myself. I would need more teaching, more discussion, more listening, more learning, and some experience with transgender people. Even after reading and teaching Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues* and *Transgender Liberation*, discussing them in class, hearing Minnie Bruce Pratt speak, and meeting Leslie Feinberg, I referred to Teena Brandon by that name and as "she" rather than her chosen name ("Brandon Teena") and chosen identity as male. My teaching, including class discussions and student journals, had pushed me further, but I didn't know yet where I was going. Charlotte Bunch coined the phrase "add women and stir" for the most basic kind of curricular change regarding women (1970), which, as Ellen Messer-Davidow points out, leaves "the offending structures and underlying assumptions intact" (1985, p. 19). I can see that I was still in the "add transgender and stir" stage of teaching, not having assimilated a transgender point of view which would change my entire outlook.

The next semester, the spring of 1995, I taught *Stone Butch Blues*, *Transgender Liberation*, and two articles on Teena Brandon's murder—the *Village Voice* article and an article from *Playboy* (Jan. 1995)—in English



210B Gay and Lesbian Literature. One of the most heated aspects of the discussion of *Stone Butch Blues* was whether it was "right" for Jess to have sex with Annie with Annie believing that she was a man. Some of the students were adamant that this was deception, and that deception was always wrong. Many simply did not believe that any woman could be so "fooled": they felt that Feinberg had failed as a writer in creating a situation that was so patently unbelievable. Then we read the voyeuristic *Village Voice* and *Playboy* articles in which the authors report that even after it was "revealed" to them that their "boyfriend" was "actually" a woman, some of Brandon's girlfriends describe him as the best lover they ever had. A woman to whom he had been engaged was quoted as saying that "sex with Brandon was 'the best sex she ever had' and that '[h]e was a good lover'" (Minkowitz, 1994, p. 26). She also said, "'He told me how all his other girlfriends had treated him like crap when they found out, . . . and it made me really angry. I started thinking. What does it matter what a person is like physically? He was a man to me, and I'd never been happier in my life'" (Konigsberg, 1995, p. 196). We had a close-at-home case, a "real-life" scenario to challenge our dismissal of the world Feinberg created as "not real,"

creating some serious cognitive dissonance.

I myself didn't know how to think about Brandon. As a woman who came out into a strong lesbian feminist community, whose values were formed by that community, and who identifies as a lesbian feminist, I was uncomfortable with a woman who loved other women yet who rejected lesbian identity. And I didn't know enough about transsexuality to understand it as a reality for someone from Lincoln, Nebraska (Teena had been born and grew up in Lincoln). A "woman who posed as a man" was still a woman to me.

But Feinberg's pamphlet, *Transgender Liberation*, gave me and the students another way to consider Teena Brandon's gender: In a section entitled, "Gender: self-expression, not anatomy" (1992, p. 5). Feinberg states:



[T]here's nothing wrong with men who are considered "masculine" and women whose self-expression falls into the range of what is considered "feminine." The problem is that the many people who don't fit these nar-

row social constraints run a gamut of harassment and violence. . . . Many people think that all "masculine" women are lesbians and all "feminine" men are gay. That is a misunderstanding. Not

all lesbians and gay men are "cross"-gendered. Not all transgendered women and men are lesbian or gay. Transgendered people are mistakenly viewed as the cusp of the lesbian and gay community. In reality the two huge communities are like circles that only partially overlap. (1992, pp. 5-6)

Our discussion in this class began to deal more clearly with the concept of transgender identity. Feinberg's protagonist, Jess, and Teena Brandon were transgendered people. I had begun to "get" it with the second teaching of this material, learning from the material, class discussion, and student journals. I believe it is significant that the students from this class whose final journals are quoted below all connect *Stone Butch Blues* to some personal experience. This shows the benefits for me of teaching the same material in different classes. These students, while their thoughts are as sophisticated as those of the students in the previous higher level class, are not as abstract in their rendering of them, and connect with the protagonist of *Stone Butch Blues* in some personal way, which helped me connect as well.

*Stone Butch Blues* had a large impact on me . . . this makes you look at how much of an impact and difference someone's born gender can make and how much that is looked at and how much it's looked down upon if you don't fit the stereotypes of your born



gender. And I can't even imagine what she went through—I've been called sir, or been mistaken for a boy a few times when I was younger and that was difficult enough, but having to go through that hate and pain everyday.

(Liz Dodds)

I think the most vivid image I will always carry with me is that of Jess being buried alive. That is the ultimate way to destruction; she felt as if she did not exist. I can't even imagine what it must be like. I know that I have felt like that but not in the intensity which Feinberg describes. [This student came to the U.S. from El Salvador 15 years ago, when she was about 5.] Reading *Zami* [by Audre Lorde] I had yet another chance to look at my own self perceptions and how I got to where I am now. I again, with pain, remembered how my family and I had to deny who we were in order to survive in the all-white Nebraska Panhandle. I do not blame myself anymore and I think that this comes from reading how Lorde can take the positive from all her experiences. Even the negative aspects of her relationships she claims as her own. This is certainly a work which I need to work through again. Jess goes through the same path of reconstructing herself as Lorde and [Connie] Panzarino go through. I saw the last dream she had as finally accepting her life, her being.

My assumption that labeling does not work, except for in a science lab, maintains its vibration. We are not science

experiments; we are human beings who could learn a lot from each other.

(Brenda Coto)

I had traveled some miles since crossing the road, but even after hearing Minnie Bruce Pratt and seeing Leslie Feinberg, teaching *Stone Butch Blues*, *Transgender Liberation*, and articles about Teena Brandon, I still had miles to go. Just after the semester was over, on May 14, 1995 (Mother's Day), a friend



and I drove to Kansas City to hear Leslie Feinberg, Minnie Bruce Pratt, and Kate Bornstein (author of *Gender Outlaw*) speak about Teena Brandon. The next day they and other transgender activists from around the country were also going to hold a rally at the trial of John Lotter, one of the men accused of murdering Teena Brandon. It took me a long time to decide to go. I didn't make a commitment, in fact, until the day before. I'm sure it was the same kind of dynamic that I experienced about crossing the road to Camp Trans, not wanting to go but knowing I had to go.

On the ride to Kansas City, we talked about what we knew of Teena Brandon and both admitted that we were uncomfortable when transgender activists referred to Teena as

"Brandon" and "he." To me, Brandon might have been a transgendered person, but she was still a woman. I suppose I still believed, like the journalists, that she was a woman "posing as a man," although of course I would argue her right to do that. I can see now that in spite of some new understandings, I was still operating within an old paradigm.

When we arrived at the Unitarian Church in Kansas City, I felt keenly how mainstream I looked and felt very much in the minority. Many people were in black and many wore black t-shirts with "Transsexual Menace" emblazoned in red. Everyone there looked like a transsexual to me, although, of course, I had little experience of what "a transsexual" "looked like." Minnie Bruce Pratt greeted me warmly. She introduced me to many other people, including a male-to-female transsexual with a lesbian daughter in Lincoln. She clearly wanted all of us to connect, network, and work together. I felt flattered but still nervous. I did not know what my place was in this community.

The first speaker was Aphrodite Jones, who was writing a "true crime" book on Teena Brandon. She made sure to tell us that one of her previous books had been on the *New York Times* bestseller list. When she said, "Teena Brandon," there were immediate shouts from the audience, "Brandon Teena." She went on, "Brandon Teena, Teena Brandon, it's all the same." But clearly some members of the audience did not agree. She



pushed on, somewhat nervously. Soon Leslie Feinberg and Minnie Bruce Pratt left the stage. A couple of other people left the audience. I wondered if I should too, but I didn't know what to do. I was relieved when she finished.

Kate Bornstein spoke next. I had seen her book *Gender Outlaw* and knew she was a male to female transsexual. She spoke about how transgender people confuse other people, and people don't like to be confused. She stated that for her, a transgender person is someone from one gender who performs another gender, but she believes that we all perform gender all the time, some more consciously than others. Bornstein calls herself transgendered, not male or female, although she has found that she enjoys "playing a girl" most.

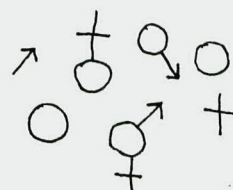
Bornstein stated that "man" and "woman" are assumed to be essential identities in our society. But she asked *how* those of us in the audience knew our gender identity, and guessed that few if any had had a chromosome check to find out (only one person had). She then asked a series of provocative questions—if one of us found her attractive, what would that make us? If we kissed her, what would that make us? If we made love with her, what would that make us? Lesbians and gays are not necessarily transgender, Bornstein stated. But she also pointed out that in the contemporary U.S. lesbians and gays do violate gender codes and transgress gender; this is often what we are persecuted

for. Therefore, gays, lesbians, transgender people, and transsexuals can work together in an inclusive movement. Bornstein believes that the time for identity politics has come and gone; it will not serve us anymore.

Minnie Bruce Pratt spoke of losing custody of her children because she was a lesbian as the defining event of her life, her introduction to the reality of oppression. She claims her place now in a gay and lesbian community but also in the gender community, not as an ally looking on and helping others, but as a part of that community. When she read from *S/HE* I felt much more connected than I did at Michigan. She spoke of the articles on Brandon which called her "she" and were obsessed with how she as a woman made love with other women while "masquerading" as a man as having stripped her of her identity as surely as did her two murderers when they pulled down her pants and forced the woman she was dating to look at her. The articles she was referring to were the articles I had read and discussed with my classes, but until this point I had not been able to really see Brandon Teena as a transgender person who had her identity denied by those who insisted she was a woman "posing" as a man or "masquerading" as a man. This was a profound change which would take me months to process.

Leslie Feinberg began her talk by directly addressing Aphrodite Jones' refusal to honor Brandon Teena's chosen identity. She stated that using

"Brandon" and "he" respects the identity that Brandon chose, lived, and died for. Feinberg spoke of transgender as an umbrella concept. For her "transgender" means to cross the boundary of the sex you were biologically born, to refuse to allow society's expectations for that sex to limit your expression of who you are. (It is also true that for some people sex is not biologically unambiguous at birth.) At this point, Feinberg pulled her wallet out of the back pocket of her pants and displayed her N.J. driver's license with "M" for "sex." She explained that if she is pulled over late at night on a highway for a broken taillight or other infraction, she is safer if her appearance appears to match the listed sex. She is subject to imprison-



ment and fine for having the "wrong" gender on her license, but she announces it publicly wherever she goes; if she is ever reported to the NJ authorities, she will make an issue out of it. However, to have the "wrong" gender on a passport is a felony, so she cannot travel internationally at this time. Feinberg challenged the audience to join transgender activists in the political work of removing the requirement for a box for "sex" from these legal documents. She compared it to the fight to remove race from legal documents and identity cards in a time when that was used for dis-



crimination. Feinberg stated her politics of inclusion as: "Tell me what your grievances are and I'll be the best fighter I can for you." She asked the same from me.

Feinberg then read the chapter "Not Just Passing" from her new book *Transgender Warriors*. Her point was that we can't just refract transgendered lives through one lens, either women's oppression or lesbian and gay oppression. Women have always "passed" as men, sometimes for economic survival or to be able to do something that only men could do, but not always. Sometimes they were lesbian, but sometimes they were not. She herself has passed most of her adult life to be able to survive and feed her family.

The day left me with a lot of new feelings and thoughts. I realized that when I first got there, I was trying to figure out who was who, who was male and who was female, who was a lesbian, who was transsexual. I thought about which bathroom people would use. I was aware of male to female transsexuals who seemed feminine and "looked like" women to me, and others who still looked like men. But I now thought of the young person killed in Nebraska as "Brandon" and his identity as male. I realized I was in a new space, but it would take me a while to really occupy it.

The next day my friend and I drove to Falls City for the demonstration outside the Richardson County courthouse at the trial of John Lotter. The announcement for the rally

states, "To raise consciousness about the failure of the sheriff to protect Brandon and the general and widespread devaluing of transgender, transsexual, and homosexual people and their rights." In "Why We're Here," a flier distributed at the demonstration, Riki Anne Wilchins states:

The murder of Brandon Teena was not an isolated incident, erupting in stark contrast upon an otherwise peaceful terrain of gender tolerance. Violence against genderqueer and trans-identified people happens, it happens regularly, *it will happen again*. Our bodies are the battleground where a war to regulate and control gender expression is increasingly being fought. We are the inevitable casualties in this bloody and unsought conflict.

We come here today to commemorate and press for freedom on behalf of *all* people who are gender oppressed. And by "gender oppressed," we do not just mean those specimens inevitably coralled in the binary zoo: the leatherqueens and faghags, the drag kings and drag queens, the stone butches and diesel dykes, the nellie queens and radical fairies, the transvestites and transsexuals, the crossdressers, leatherdykes and dykedaddies. But also for the 17 year-old midwestern cheerleader who dies from anorexia because "real women" are preternaturally thin. The Joe Sixpack who wraps his car around a

crowded schoolbus on his way home from the bar because "real men" are heavy drinkers. The aging body, crippled in an unnecessary hysterectomy because certain kinds of bodies simply don't matter as much. In fact, we are here today to press for freedom, not just for people like Brandon Teena and Marsha P. Johnson, who died for their expression of gender, but also for those who felt *impelled* and even *empowered* to kill to preserve regimes of gender: in short *until each and every one of us* is delivered from this most pernicious, divisive, and destructive of insanities.

On the back of the statement were the name eight of ea people who had been killed because of their expression of gender.

I recognized many people from the day before, but I still felt some dis-ease, not sure that I was willing to be seen by others as a part of this community, not sure that I wanted to be part of this community. We formed ourselves on the side of the courthouse along the main street and held signs with pictures of Brandon Teena, "In Memoriam." I found myself frightened to stand with a sign by the side of the road, but I did it. Many people slowed their cars down to look, some waved before they realized who we were, many stonily looked away after they realized, a few waved or honked in support, and a few shouted obscenities or threw things. In spite of my discom-



fort at being in a group in which I felt in the minority, everyone was caring and thoughtful and accepting of me. It was a warm day, and people circulated among us, making sure everyone had sunscreen, making sure people had enough to drink and were not becoming dehydrated.

At one point Kate Bornstein crossed the road so that we had people on both sides. She was dressed all in black leather, with knee-high boots, a leather vest, and a flamboyant hat. She's a wonderful, outgoing, gregarious person, and it made me feel good to see her there on that Nebraska street, smiling, waving, greeting all those who went by in their cars.

"IT'S NOT A GIRL  
IT'S NOT A BOY  
IT'S JUST A BABY"

After a while of standing along the street, we traded off to rest while others stood with the signs. On one break I talked to a male-to-female transsexual who was "in transition," that is, living as a woman in preparation for surgery. She was worried about whether she would be fired from her job because people were uncomfortable with her sex change. In a lesson I learn over and over again in my life, I found myself relating to her as an individual, feeling her worries and fears, instead of seeing a label or a category: "trans-

sexual." I knew that if I cared about this person as a person I needed to work within the transgender movement. It's what I work for in my teaching—to help myself and students come to care about people whose experiences are very different from ours and to become their allies.

Several months later, when I taught 20th Century Lesbian Writers for the second time, a graduate student, who had taken the course the first time, served as an intern, attending all classes, taking notes on discussion, reading student journals, and having regular discussions with me about what she observed. Interestingly, she felt that unlike the first course, this time the entire class was framed by a transgender analysis, from the first book, *The Well of Loneliness*, to *Stone Butch Blues* and the articles about Brandon Teena. Although we again defined "lesbian" the first night, we never took gender as a binary or a fixed category. We frequently discussed local and national transgender events as well. During the semester, John Lotter was sentenced to death for the murders of Brandon Teena, Lisa Lambert, and Phillip DeVine (two others staying at the same house with Brandon who were killed at the same time). The other murderer had already been sentenced to three life sentences. In addition, Aphrodite Jones' "true-crime" book, *All She Wanted*, was published. Even the article about it in the local paper had an insert headlined "Transsexual activists criticize

book's author" which quoted transgender activist Riki Anne Wilchins as saying: "The feeling in this community is Brandon died for the desire to be a man. . . . It's a matter of showing respect for a person's choice" (Duggan, 1996, p. 6A). The article reported on cancelled book signings in Lincoln because of fear of protests. In addition, a tasteless joke about Brandon Teena on Saturday Night Live was widely protested by the transgender community. We didn't wait to get to the transgender material at the end of the class; a transgender analysis infused all of our readings and discussion. For example, it seemed clear that today we could understand Stephen, the main character of *The Well of Loneliness*, as a transgender person.

Near the end of the semester, Minnie Bruce Pratt and Leslie Feinberg spoke at UNL. I had invited them in Kansas City the year before; now it was happening. With help from many others, I had organized the event, which included raising the money, arranging the publicity, ordering books for a bookselling and booksigning, making travel arrangements, and all the other things that need to be done for a successful event. Pratt and Feinberg spoke in the evening to an audience of about 300, consisting of many university students who had read their works, a few faculty, community members, and transgender activists. The evaluations and responses were overwhelmingly positive, including at least one person who



said it was the first time she had been in a place with people who looked like her. I felt like I no longer had to cross the road; I belonged on both sides.

It seems strange that so little of this teaching narrative takes place in the classroom. It tells me how much I need to be a learner in order to be a teacher. Of course, this is only one of many stories I could tell about making the conceptual shift that teaching *Stone Butch Blues* and transgender issues required of me. It also strikes me that here and in other instances in my 20-year teaching career, I found what I needed outside the academy, in lesbian and feminist events, workshops and festivals, community work, and activism. It seems important for me to tell this particular story because my university validates, by paying my way, only academic conferences where I am presenting my research to others. In telling this story I am also aware that my students are often ahead of me; their journals show that some of them could see the implications of our reading more quickly than I. Much of my learning takes place in the classroom and through activities associated with it, such as class discussions, responding to student journals, and student reports.

I find that I need to put myself in scary and uncomfortable situations to grow as a teacher. A thread that runs through this narrative is that I did things I dreaded and feared doing. I realize with humility that this is what I ask of my students all the time, and that they

almost universally respond with courage and faith. Like many others, I have found that transformative teaching means transforming myself. □

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