Tipping Points and Shifting Expectations: The Promise of Applied Trans Studies for Building Structural Competency

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In 2021, the United States experienced the most active year on record for anti-trans legislation. In 2022, we are witnessing the renewal of this legislative harassment, with increased success on the part of anti-trans lawmakers. When these bills are passed into law and, importantly, even when they are resoundingly defeated or fail to reach an actual vote, the harmful rhetoric and ideology that is attached to them reverberates throughout trans communities resulting in social and psychological harm for transgender, nonbinary, and gender diverse people. The burden of addressing and offsetting this harm is often placed on the shoulders of other trans people who serve as grassroots leaders in their communities. This article argues that while this support is lifesaving for individual trans people, transformative change requires an increase in *structural competency* in our mainstream social institutions, and makes the case for applied trans studies as a pathway to that end.

The experience of being transgender in the United States has shifted in ways that were hard for me to foresee the day I picked up the June 9, 2014 issue of *TIME* magazine from a large chain bookshop in Spartanburg, South Carolina. It had been four years since I started my own medical transition in a doctor's office two miles away from where I sat in my overstuffed chair, drinking my over-steamed latte, sheepishly reading a magazine suggesting I could maybe calm down a little bit with my social gender dysphoria. We had reached a *tipping point*, after all. To be sure, there has been an unimaginable increase in the general public's awareness of transgender experience. An increased presence in scripted, reality, and news media has resulted in trans people and their concerns taking up otherwise inaccessible space in the minds and homes of millions

of people (Billard and Gross 2020; Capuzza and Spencer 2018). As awareness continues to increase and more trans people feel comfortable being visible as such in their everyday lives, our central social institutions are being pushed by diverse factions of stakeholders to either facilitate or eliminate gender diversity. Increased activity meant to empower or constrain gender diversity has emerged in nearly every social context and institution.

Seven years after Black transgender actress and activist Laverne Cox appeared on the cover of *TIME*, we seem to have reached another tipping point. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) named 2021 the most active year on record for anti-trans legislation in the United States (Krishnakumar 2021). Right wing activists and anti-trans lawmakers tested out the viability of their approaches in statehouses across the country in 2021, slightly tweaking them at each iteration to see which approach would hold up under legal scrutiny (strict or otherwise). In many cases, trans and queer activists worked tirelessly to defeat these proposals. They organized public protests and facilitated outreach campaigns; they attended state and local legislative sessions and gave impassioned public testimony on behalf of trans youth and young adults; they created community care spaces to process the political moment and facilitate the provision of direct services and mutual aid during the onslaught of attacks; they built coalitions made up of diverse stakeholders, trans people, and cis allies who were already leading a variety of social justice organizations across their communities (e.g., Branigin 2021; Brown 2022; Rummler 2022). Working together, these activists demonstrated the kind of power that can be seized when individuals come together as a community, make the decision to approach social problems with a collective orientation, and combine resources so that everyone has what they need to contribute to the best of their ability. Unfortunately, these efforts also revealed the limitations of our power and the remaining work that is required from all of us beyond the defensive strategy of political whack-a-mole that has gripped our movement in recent years.

In 2022, we are witnessing the renewal of this legislative harassment. State and local lawmakers concentrated in the US Southeast, but increasingly spread out around the country, have already put pen to paper to prevent and sanction the provision of life-saving medical care to trans kids and young adults; rule out the acknowledgement of trans and queer identities in public education; make it illegal for trans kids to play sports on teams that reflect their gender identity; punish people for using the restroom or a fitting room in a public space; offer safe harbor to those who shapeshift religious doctrine to condemn, rather than love, thy neighbor; and in some cases to frame the provision of support by a parent, caregiver, teacher, or other authority figure as child abuse or grooming (e.g., Burns 2022; Carlisle 2022; Ishisaka 2022; Yi 2022). To rally support, proponents of this legislation rely on tropes that stigmatize trans, nonbinary, and gender diverse people as dangerous, predatory, deceptive, and sociopathic (Sessa-Hawkins 2021).

An especially cruel and harmful component of the recent string of negative policy proposals, the majority of this legislative harassment targets trans youth and young adults, as well as the adults or authority figures in their lives who might offer them support and resources (e.g., Branigin 2022; Sosin 2022). Even when bills are defeated, and conservative activists are unable to use the power of law to control trans people, the rhetoric does a fair amount of the job for them. A research group in the United

States conducted focus groups with trans and gender diverse youth to explore the perceived impact of the political climate on young trans people's well-being (Paceley et al. 2020; Paceley et al. 2021). They found that anti-trans rhetoric leads to the development of dangerous social environments, noting increased suicidal ideation, increased feelings of isolation, and decreased self-worth (Paceley et al. 2020). Ultimately, this rhetoric leads to increased psychological distress among trans youth, and "emboldens peers to perpetuate bias-based bullying and harassment, which is itself associated with poor mental health, suicidal ideation, suicidal behavior, poor academic performance, and substance abuse among [trans and gender-diverse] people" (Paceley et al. 2021, 3).

SOCIO-POLITICAL REVERB

When these bills are passed into law and, importantly, even when they are resoundingly defeated or fail to reach an actual vote, anti-trans lawmakers and their allies manufacture and encourage the spread of harmful rhetoric and ideology that is necessary to support the content of their legislation (Billard 2021). In turn, this arms everyday citizens with dangerous ammunition and deputizes them in the culture war fever dreams of right-wing America. In Texas, pharmacists are reporting parents of trans children to child protective services—scaring, threatening, and potentially dividing families who are following current standards of care as outlined by national and international medical authorities (Sosin 2022; Yurcaba 2022). In Alabama, schoolteachers are outing trans kids to their parents and peers, placing them at risk of emotional abuse, physical violence, and potential abandonment (Cohen 2022). Under the guise of protecting children, these consequences put trans, nonbinary, and gender diverse youth and young adults directly in harm's way.

Even when they are defeated, efforts at enacting anti-trans legislation have widespread effects for trans, nonbinary, and gender diverse people. The rhetorical and ideological work that goes into attempts at discriminatory policies affects outsider views of trans people, but that work also contributes to internalized stigma, poor mental health, and expectations of poor treatment, thus creating a hostile social climate and poor outlook for trans people (e.g., Grzenda et al. 2021). This socio-political reverb results in disparate life chances and disproportionate disadvantage throughout the life course and across social contexts and institutions.

The minority stress model was originally developed to connect lesbian women's (Brooks 1981; Rich et al. 2020), and later gay men's (Meyer 1995, 2003), experiences of poor mental health to the heteronormative social conflicts they experience related to their sexuality. Importantly, this model was developed to push back against the widespread assumptions that lesbians and gay men experienced negative mental health outcomes due to a sexual minority identity in and of itself. According to the minority stress perspective, the social stigma attached to sexual minorities—and not merely a sexual minority identity—results in a lower social status for lesbians and gay men. Lower status, according to the theory, results in higher rates of prejudice and discrimination and the accumulation of fewer resources with which to cope. According to the minority stress model, the experience of negative life events, their anticipation, and the internalization of their meaning leads to poor mental health outcomes for sexual minorities.

The minority stress model was later expanded to explain the high rates of depression, anxiety, and suicidality among trans people. Rather than poor mental health outcomes being a characteristic of trans identity, psychologists Michael L. Hendricks and Rylan J. Testa (2012) suggest that trans people experience gender minority stress that overlaps with and operates alongside sexual minority stress. Hendricks and Testa suggest a pathway from gender-related negative life events, the fear and anticipation of future negative events, and the internalization of transphobic stigma to suicidality and psychological distress among trans people. Trans-specific negative life events include a range of anti-trans experiences including microaggressions, rejection, emotional abuse, and physical violence. Whether the events are experienced or anticipated, their presence in the lives of trans people often results in hypervigilance, avoidance, and self-isolation (Rood et al. 2016), exacerbating mental health disparities and reducing coping resources.

As hostile political rhetoric aimed at trans people increases, so too do experiences of minority stress (Gonzalez et al. 2016). In this ongoing wave of legislative harassment, trans people are positioned as deranged, deceptive, and dangerous in order to justify state-sponsored control, discipline, and punishment. The ideology necessary to justify removing a child from a loving home because their parent or guardian filled a prescription, written by a licensed physician, for life-saving medical care, or the argument necessary to make sense of terminating a teacher who recommended a book from the library to a student who asked for literature that reflected gender-diverse experiences like their own, requires us to lower our expectations for the humanity of trans people. Low expectations allow the stigmatization of trans, nonbinary, and gender diverse people, heightening their chances of experiencing discrimination, rejection, or violence due to their gender identity. One research group found that transgender adults who live in US states with anti-trans policies report more suicide attempts than their peers in states without legislation that negatively targets their community (Perez-Brumer et al. 2015). In hostile political climates, encounters of anti-trans bias become ubiquitous, trans people come to expect them, and adapt their lives in order to avoid them (Rood et al. 2016). Over time, some trans people may accept this treatment and its associated implications, leading to even higher rates of depression, suicidality, and other negative mental health outcomes (Bradford et al. 2013; Goldblum et al. 2012; Herman 2013; Lefevor et al. 2019; McLemore 2018; Miller and Grollman 2015).

EMBODIED KNOWLEDGES

As a ninth-grade student in South Carolina, I got caught writing a note to my first girlfriend during my Spanish class. It was mostly benign, but definitely included cheesy high school crush stuff and angsty reflections on my growing gender dysphoria. I was embarrassed and a bit annoyed that my letter was taken, but assumed my teacher threw the note out. When it resurfaced a few weeks later at a parent-teacher conference, I had forgotten all about it. My mother always showed up to those conversations, and parent-teacher conferences were usually really good days for me; I was an anxious student, had very few friends, and focused on academic achievement as a means of control and a pathway out of my hometown. But my academic achievement was not the focus of the parent-teacher conference on that particular evening. My teacher thought

that my sexuality and gender identity were more important topics to discuss with my mother than my ability to conjugate verbs. While the class note itself was standard fare for ninth-grade love—wistful longings, hyperbolic emotions, and way too much emphasis on lyrics from popular music—the object of my affections and the meanings attached to that were of the most concern to the adults in my life. When my mother walked out of my classroom, she called me a liar and said I had broken her trust. I've always felt like she never looked at me the same way again, never saw me quite the same way. My Spanish teacher stopped interacting with me or looking my way at all. As hard as I tried, I did not pick up the Spanish language that semester. "What did you expect?" Mama asked, in no way looking for an answer, when she saw my report card that term.

Around that same time, I was beginning to understand that my social status across a variety of institutions was directly connected to my gender nonconformity and its impact on others' perception of my sexuality. At home, school, church, and other community spaces, where I was once held in high esteem as the well-behaved child, the straight-A student, or the youth group leader, I was now considered untrustworthy, a disruption, and a bad influence. My expectations fell alongside my social esteem, and I came to anticipate a world that was hostile to people like me. I began to expect that mistreatment would come my way, and that expectation changed how I understood my place in the world. Over time, I withdrew from friends and family, and my faith in social institutions steadily declined.

Like many people, for better or worse, I came to know trans people and the trans community through media representations. Likewise, I came to understand the social sanctions that would befall me if my gender rejected a cisnormative standpoint. The first trans man that I ever encountered was through film. His name was Brandon Teena. He died in Humboldt, Nebraska from a gunshot wound on December 31, 1993. He also died from stigma, as local authorities mocked, dismissed, and failed to protect him after he reported being brutally attacked by the two men who, days later, murdered him and his friends in a revenge plot. At thirteen years old, I grieved with those who loved him, as I watched the film *Boys Don't Cry* on a loop. I did not know at the time why I was so moved by this story of a transgender man. I did know, somehow implicitly, that I should hide my grief. Upon one viewing, I was interrupted by my mother's boyfriend. Feeling the need to defend my emotions, I said, "People are so cruel." He snapped back, "What did you expect?"

Ten years later, I saw the film again as a college student, attending a screening for an LGBTQ cultural event on campus. Those same giant feelings of grief returned to my chest, the ones that would show up when I was caught off guard by having a gender experience that was understood as trans. By the time we reached the violent climax in the narrative arc of the film, the other attendees watched in horror as emotional, physical, and sexual violence was inflicted on this young trans man. I quickly excused myself before the final shot and the follow up panel discussion. I was angry at the event organizers for screening this film. I was angry with my friends for being shocked by trans-antagonistic violence. I was angry at myself for identifying with Brandon. I repeated the words of my parents in my head, *what did you expect,* as I sped away from campus. When I reached the parking lot of the hotel-turned-low-income-student-housing where I lived near campus, I thought my grief would swallow me whole. It would be a few more years before I would understand that grief as part of my own

gender experience, less tied to the tragedy of Brandon's life and death and more tied to how it reinforced the ideas I held related to my own.

I started my own gender transition process my first year of graduate school. This serendipitous intersection allowed me the opportunity to spend an enormous amount of time educating myself on all things trans. I read every article and book I could find on the subject. As I consumed all of this content, I recognized similar feelings of grief that had nearly consumed me years prior, first in middle school and again in college as I came to understand my identity through the life and death of Brandon Teena. I began to wonder what I may have thought about trans experience (my own and others') and how my self-concept and identity may have been different if a Hollywood version of Brandon Teena had not been my first trans peer. I wanted to understand how trans people were given the cultural material to make sense of themselves. I wanted to understand the possibilities of what we could expect for ourselves and from those in our lives.

The first piece of independent research that I did in graduate school was a content analysis of documentary film focused on trans men and trans masculinity. One of the first films that I found was *Southern Comfort*, the story of Robert Eads. Robert died in Toccoa, Georgia from ovarian cancer on January 17, 1999. He also died from stigma, as provider after provider denied him necessary treatment due to his trans status. Robert explained that providers were more concerned about the comfort of their other patients than they were for his life. I grieved with his chosen family, more than a decade after his death, as I watched the end of his life play out on screen. He smoked cigarettes, drank coffee, and spoke in a thick southern accent about the medical providers who had left him for dead. His drawl comforted me, bringing the possibility of southern trans experience into being even as it was narrating the premature end to his own life. As Robert recalled his failed attempts to access life-saving medical care, I remembered medical providers an hour and a half north of Toccoa, more than a decade after Robert's death, refusing to touch me or look me in the eyes as I sought gender-affirming care. I was not shocked to hear that Robert's experiences had been much worse than my own had been to that point; I had learned to expect that they would be.

Around the same time that I was grieving for Robert Eads, a Southern trans elder I would never have the opportunity to meet, several of my friends from college started to identify as trans. One came out by sharing a link to a video he posted on his YouTube channel, where he had been documenting his experience of social and medical transition. I watched the videos with mixed feelings. I was excited for my friend, and for myself knowing another trans man in real life. Yet, I was incredibly scared for him, for us. What could we expect? In one of his videos, he described the loneliness he felt as a trans man in the South, lamented a future that he may never get to see, and floated the idea of moving to the West Coast in search of community. (All trans masculine Google searches seemed to lead to the Bay Area in 2011.) This is what I expected. A few videos later, he had decided to stay put and build a community of his own. Alongside a couple of friends in a coffee shop one afternoon, he started Gender Benders (GB), a grassroots support group for trans, nonbinary, and gender diverse people in the area. Within a few months, the group was thriving. That is *not* what I expected.

On a few trips back home, I attended some of the GB coffee meetups or group hangouts. I got to know other trans people from the area, heard their stories of family

and community, and started to recognize the limitations of my expectations related to trans life. By this point, my college friend who helped start the group had moved on to other opportunities and to seek other resources. Yet, the leadership built on the connections made over weekly coffee meetups, expanding the organization's local and online presence, and eventually providing resources and community to thousands of trans Southerners. Much like my friend, most folks involved in the organization come and go as their needs are met or as their needs change. In the summer of 2014, I attended Camp GB, a long-weekend retreat for trans folks to spend time in community and to access resources. It was the first time that I had been in a space that was completely centered on and designed by trans people. In that environment, I was able to develop a more well-rounded set of expectations about trans life in the region, and a better understanding of my own needs as a trans Southerner. I realized that I needed trans connection, and I needed to do whatever I could to make sure others had access to trans community.

In the summer of 2015, I attended camp as a member of the leadership team. The group had grown significantly, gathered a lot of support, and was ready to move beyond donated air mattresses and makeshift basement dorms. We looked around and found the perfect spot in the north Georgia foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, a picturesque campground tucked away in the woods of Toccoa, Georgia. It was not until we pulled our own caravan of trans cowboys through the town that Robert Eads referred to as "bubba town" that I remembered that this was where he spent the 53 years of his life.

Over the next several years, we would bring hundreds of trans Southerners to Toccoa, providing our community with access to mental and physical healthcare; peer connection and social support; recreation and fellowship; skill-building for grantmaking and community organizing; and a relaxing retreat that was centered on trans people caring for and loving other trans people. We ate every meal together in the large camp dining hall. We laughed, played games, and had fun together. We cried and processed our grief together. And we built relationships that helped us see and love ourselves in ways that had previously been denied to us. At Camp GB, we raised each other's expectations, and we sought to exceed them every time we came together.

OPPOSITIONAL KNOWLEDGES

Peer support plays an outsized role in interrupting the psychological consequences of stigma, discrimination, and other identity-related stress among trans people. Indicating access to peers, and the potential support they may offer, is directly related to lower levels of distress among trans people in the bulk of psychological research on the subject. This work notes that peer support is a protective factor against mental health issues broadly and against gender-related psychological distress in particular. For example, Bariola and colleagues (2015) and Testa and colleagues (2014) show that when trans people have more frequent contact with their peers they are able to develop greater resilience.

In my own and others' research on trans and gender-diverse Southerners, a regular theme emerges indicating that one way that sourcing support from the trans community facilitates positive mental health is through self-acceptance and the ac-

ceptance of trans identity broadly. By coming into contact with community-based counter-narratives to the rhetoric of legislative harassment, trans people gain access to a new way of framing their experiences. This new frame situates their gender experiences within a community of shared others, provides them language for explaining their experiences to others, and potentially normalizes their previously stigmatized experiences of gender for them and others in their lives.

Philosopher Talia Mae Bettcher wrote in 2007 that framing trans people as "evil deceivers and make-believers" transforms us into villains deserving of the rude, hostile, and violent reactions received from those uncomfortable with, offended by, or surprised by our gendered bodies, identities, or experiences (see also Billard 2019). As Bettcher argued, the stigma that is attached to our identities, and the framing used to justify interpersonal violence against us, poses the sometimes silent, sometimes roaring question, *what did you expect?* Before trans was an identity or experience that was intelligible to me, I did not have access to the collective knowledge necessary to form an oppositional viewpoint of my mistreatment. I was unable to separate others' reactions to my gender nonconformity from its (and ultimately my own) inherent value.

As communication scholar Sarah E. Jones (2020, 268) writes, when trans people do not have the resources to challenge them, cisnormative

> ways of knowing can function as a deterministic power—molding who
> trans people can be, how they exist in the world, and what rights they
> do or do not have [...] by controlling the social, organizational, and legal
> opportunities available.

It was not until I encountered trans ways of knowing through interaction with other trans people and gained insider explanations for my experiences within trans-centered community, that I was able to develop what sociologist KL Broad (2001) termed a "transgender standpoint." That is, my connection to a collective transgender identity enabled a way of knowing gender that included, explained, and celebrated those of us who operate outside of its normative construction. In Broad's (2001, 1151) conceptualization, a transgender standpoint questions "the dominant gender categorization system that assumes stable gender categories." Further, Broad (2001, 1151–52) writes:

> a transgender standpoint might examine how the processes of binary
> gender constraints (in medicine, psychology, and law) serve to patholo-
> gize transgender expression (such that transgender individuals dispro-
> portionately end up under medical supervision or in the criminal jus-
> tice system) and marginalize transgender people from gendered social
> structures (e.g., sex-segregated jobs and marriage, etc.) and services
> (e.g., welfare and child support).

As a young person attempting to make sense of my own experiences of gender and the reactions it prompted from others in my life, a cisnormative standpoint was the only one available to me. Through trans community, I was able to access a transgender standpoint that radically reframed my expectations and explanations for the treatment I received as a trans person. As Bariola and colleagues (2015, 2112) write, "for marginalized people, identification with similar others allows for the development of a positive in-group identity, encourages positive self-appraisal, and allows access to group-level coping."

Testa and colleagues (2014) explain that simply having a prior awareness that

other trans people exist and prior engagement with trans people enhances psychological well-being when trans people first begin to explore their identities. During early trans identity development, these factors may result in trans people being less fearful, less suicidal, and more comfortable in their newly formed identity. Knowing that trans people exist and having previous interaction with trans people was so influential to mental health that, in one study, it cut the rates of suicide in half (Testa et al. 2014). This body of scholarship provides "support for the value of transgender individuals connecting with similar others, possibly providing the opportunity to question stigma from the majority culture and reappraise their experiences in a self-affirmative way" (Bockting et al. 2013, 949).

A growing number of studies suggest peer support is especially powerful when it occurs within trans community spaces. In and through connections with trans community organizations, individual trans people are offered a structure that facilitates the content, timing, availability, and distribution of peer connections. In an article I co-authored with my colleague Baker Rogers (Johnson and Rogers 2020), we show that some peer support structures, like those that offer regular opportunities for creating and maintaining relationships with other trans people, facilitate strong networks and norms through regular, intentional programming that destigmatizes and normalizes gender diversity, while encouraging positive frames for understanding a range of trans experiences.

STRUCTURAL COMPETENCY

Both as an academic researcher and in collaboration with community partners, I have completed over five years of ethnographic fieldwork, conducted more than 100 in-depth one-on-one interviews, and conducted 10 focus groups across the South, as well as surveyed more than 5,000 trans, nonbinary, and gender diverse Southerners. The first takeaway from this mass of data is clear: peer support is a gamechanger for the mental, physical, and social well-being of individual trans people. The power of peer support for the well-being of trans people is not a new finding. From the natural and social sciences to the fine arts and humanities, scholars thinking and writing about trans people consistently report that peer connections lead to positive outcomes (Armangau and Figeac 2022; Fairchild 2022; Gosling et al. 2021; Johnson and Rogers 2020; Kia et al. 2021; Wilson and Liss 2022; Worrell et al. 2022).

However, the *structural* dynamics of peer support are often overlooked by researchers, whose unstated assumptions are that the benefits of peer connection are consequences of organic one-on-one relationships. The scholarship that documents the effects of this support tends to neglect those who are facilitating this resource for their communities. A key consequence of this neglect is a partial understanding of the potential and impact of peer support for those receiving it, as well as those facilitating it. As Joksimović (2020, 126) writes, leaving these leaders out of the collective conversation is a form of "systemic erasure" and "epistemic injustice." Not only does it erase their accomplishments, but it erases the price they pay and the personal resources that they are required to use to achieve them.

An additional takeaway of my own community-based research into trans community emerges as a signpost guiding us to act, while warning us of the risks: Embed-

dedness in trans community shifts some of the burden of identifying, locating, and accessing that support from individual trans people in need to the grassroots leaders who are organizing it and facilitating others' access to it. The burden of individuals managing cisnormative ways of knowing and being does not disappear in the presence of peer support. Rather, it is transferred to other individuals: leaders who are organizing peer support groups and social gatherings; connecting trans youth to opportunities for self-expression through advocacy, activism, and the arts; educating their neighbors, including K–12 teachers, healthcare providers, social service agents, and other resource gatekeepers or state actors in their communities; and, when traditional service infrastructure fails, organizing events or paying out of their own pockets in order to provide healthcare, food, education, and housing to trans people in their communities.

Since my first weekend at Camp GB in 2014, I have tried to understand how its components could be scaled up to bring the most trans people into community with each other, provide the best resources, and do the work to shift institutional norms in favor of trans lives. Community leaders' aptitude for and commitment to creating and providing resources for others is rooted in their embodied knowledge of familial alienation, resource deprivation, and social isolation. It is strengthened by the oppositional knowledge gained from the collective creation of a transgender standpoint. We might understand trans grassroots labor by situating it in what Hil Malatino (2022, 48) refers to as a "t4t praxis of love" that is about "being with and bearing with; about witnessing one another, being mirrors for one another that avoid some of the not-so-funhouse effects of cisnormative perceptive habits that frame trans folk as too much, not enough, failed or not yet realized." To scale up the transformative power of grassroots trans labor, we must first provide for the trans people who have accepted the burden of this praxis. To maximize the potential of this t4t praxis of love, however, we must raise our collective expectations of where and how trans people are allowed to come together and support each other, and which institutions and individuals we hold accountable to making that happen.

Rather than shifting fully to a mutual aid model of trans community support, defined by Dean Spade (2020, 7) as the "collective coordination to meet each other's needs, usually stemming from an awareness that the systems we have in place are not going to meet them," we must build structural competency by holding social institutions accountable to a praxis of love for transgender, nonbinary, and gender diverse people. In practice, this looks like everyday institutions engaging with the embodied and oppositional knowledges of trans people—listening and responding to our experiences, needs, and desires—without adding to the burden of the trans people they serve, or those who occupy positions in their organizations. One pathway to structural competency is an institutional investment in applied transgender studies scholarship, a field that is determined and uniquely situated to "identify, analyze, and ultimately, improve the material conditions transgender people face in daily life" (Billard et al. 2021; see also Billard, Everhart, and Zhang 2022). This competency takes shape when institutions move beyond inclusion (Johnson 2015) to anticipate and intentionally design for, rather than merely respond to, gender diversity by creating spaces that center trans bodies, trans minds, and trans emotions. Engaging with applied trans studies scholarship facilitates this competency by expanding institutional definitions of gen-

der—requiring institutional stakeholders to rethink who and what counts as trans (Labuski and Keo-Meier 2015)—so that they may account for a range of gendered experiences in their policies and practices. Through structural competency, our everyday institutions become robust against sociopolitical tipping points that destabilize trans communities. Through a reliance on applied trans studies scholarship, rather than partisan talking points, institutions may design for empowerment and guard against constraint for transgender, nonbinary, and gender diverse people.

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