Strategies for Teaching and Citing Scholars Who Have Transitioned

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Many of us regularly teach and cite scholars who have transitioned. We recently engaged our gender and sexuality studies colleagues in a conversation about strategies for referencing scholars who have transitioned. We are particularly interested in strategies that help our students make sense of the social construction and complexities of gender identifications while helping

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In discussing the experiences of trans authors across time and context, we should look first and foremost to these writers' own narration of their biographies for guidance. How authors talk about their own relationships to their pre-transition selves should shape our own language choices and broader framings of their journeys and underscore the importance of amplifying people's own wishes in sharing their work with others. Coupled with broader discussion of the harms that practices like deadnaming can do to people who do not want to actively center their pre-transition lives in their narratives of self-actualization, centering authors' own perspectives allows us to affirm inclusive values in educational practice. In the process, this approach gives students a great foundation for both responding to trans people as unique individuals and being conscious of the many challenges that trans people face as a population.

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The core of the work that I do in the world—whether professional, personal, activist, or all three—is an interest in justice. In the interest of doing citational justice to trans academics, I have

adopted the following strategies. First, I acknowledge that trans people are exactly who they say they are and that each person may have their own requests about how other people show respect to their identities when speaking about past events. While citing a trans author, I try to find how that author has either written about understandings of their own past identities or the pronouns that the author asks to be used for them. So, for example, there are many interviews with Leslie Feinberg where zie expresses delight in zie/hir pronouns, but Feinberg also says that many people used she/her for Feinberg and that Feinberg didn't really care. There's complexity in that statement that could be flattened by making an overall statement about "the correct pronouns to refer to Leslie Feinberg are X" when that's not actually what Feinberg herself said. So if I were writing about Feinberg, I would make a conscious decision in the context of those interviews, make my decision, and footnote and explanation for that decision.

This means that while the rule that I always follow is to respect the person, the practice can look different for different scholars. Some trans scholars of my acquaintance, for example, have "orphaned" work published under a previous name and do not want to be connected to those works in any way. Others would prefer that the citation cite their current name with a parenthetical note that it was published as Previous Name. Many intentionally have not changed their last names and would prefer to be cited by their last names only. For me, the best practice is care and attention, respect for the writer's own narratives of their identity and past work, and asking when I'm not certain. The individual attention is worth it if it furthers justice.

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Pronouns: ze/zir/zim or he/his/him

I'm an intersex trans man who published for years before being able to transition. When referencing the work of a scholar who later transitioned, I suggest a simple set of steps. First, if you can ask the author—in a way that is safe for them—how they like the issue handled, do it. If you can't do that, look at their work to see if it guides you in some way. And if not, don't misgender a person in the present by referring to them with a pronoun they do not now use just because you're talking about the past.

Gender identities and transitional paths and self-understandings vary. But one thing I know is that many cis people view us as "switching genders": we were "born female" or "born male," and then at some point we changed into something else. In the view of many cis people, there's a date when this happened, marked by a legal decision or medical intervention: the day of our legal name change, the day we had "the surgery." But few trans people today understand themselves in this way. Our identities define our gender. We spend a lot of energy fighting the idea that people are free to misgender trans people who have not accessed some particular legal or medical service.

The idea that writings I published before I changed my name were writings of a woman, while those published after were writings of a man, is simply wrong. I was never a woman by identity.

I was perceived as a woman and treated as a woman and legally categorized as a woman, but the fundamental precept of gender transition is that our gender identities tell us our truths.

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There is no formal agreement on how to cite authors who have transitioned. A decade ago, there seemed to be a conservative agreement among scholars to cite how a piece was published. It was advised to treat it like any name change, such as when women take-on or drop a last name due to marriage or divorce. In referring to the author, it became much less agreed upon.

I developed my own consistent practice of what seemed the most respectful to the author (and potentially avoidant and practical), but this also gets tricky as that can be complicated and we may not always have the most current information about a person's identity.

My current practice is to cite just the last name—no initials or first names. This is in paragraph and in the references. I like that this provides visibility without making assumptions. It can also disrupt the reading. I have never been called on this practice. I think editors and reviewers leave it up to the author to decide. This may change in the near future, but for now it is still a gray area, and I appreciate that they leave it to the "expert" to decide. (Sidenote: what if we dropped first names altogether for everyone in text? All but the first in text referrals to an author are by last names…why not also include the first mention in this practice?)

I like this practice of "just the last name" for teaching and for discussions. It forces the readers and audience to recognize something different is going on and ask questions.

I have also written directly to authors regarding their preference. I do this particularly for talks so I know how to talk about an author. However, I can imagine this leading to inbox issues and extra work for the scholar on a greater scale, so I only do this when I have exhausted all other avenues including googling for interviews and background on the author and inquiring with my scholar network. Doing this, to date, has always been met with appreciation from the scholar and has even lead to some networking.

It is clear we have a lag in practice and what has been formally declared or stated in the various citation guidelines. I am confident the issue is quite solvable. Perhaps, in the future I will become proactive and include how I want to be referred to or my preferred citation in the notes of the work to further contribute to these discussions.