



Prathim-Maya Dora-Laskey

TRANS(FORMATIONS)  
AND TENDERNESS

Rhetorics and Resources to Support  
Transgender Youth in the United States

Queer and LGBT+ Studies

Collection Editor

**PATRICK THOMSEN**

LIVED PLACES  
PUBLISHING





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For trans and gender-diverse young people  
whose courage teaches, whose joy endures  
whose very being transforms what is possible  
may your lives keep reshaping the worlds to come

and

For my dear Amma  
Lakshmi Malati Manorama "Manu"  
Gadadoss Wandawasi Dorakanti Bhaskaran  
(1946-2025)

"You don't even *have* to understand...  
you can just *love*"

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# Foreword

Transgender youth, like other teens and young adults undergo formative experiences that are simultaneously fraught and prone to fluidity and vulnerability. Gender dysphoria, transition, and political grandstanding can create additional obstacles to their quality of life. How can adults and allies around them educate themselves about rhetoric and resources to be useful advocates? How can we enable and celebrate trans possibility and trans joy? This book focuses on three formative spaces (family, school, and community) and provides ways to understand and employ rhetoric and resources in ways that support trans youth to provide hopeful and positive life outcomes.

Fluctuations in the political climate—who happens to be in power in the White House and in the courts—certainly affect trans youth and their families. However, the symmetry of democratic checks and balances and the beauty of a spirit of fairness continue to exert an influence. I hope this makes it possible to use the rhetorical devices and resources itemized here (admittedly gathered under more optimistic times) to hold our systems accountable and ourselves open to possibilities. The Supreme Court's *Skrametti* Decision of June 2025, which allows for states to withhold physical gender-affirming care (medication and surgery) from minors, is a serious setback. But it is a setback, a complication—not a terminal point. Already the American Medical Academy (AMA) and the American Academy

of Pediatrics (AAP) along with Human Rights Campaign (HRC) and the American Civil Rights Union (ACLU) are mounting legal advocacy and challenges, especially in states where such bans are in progress. It is good to know that there are people out there fighting for us; we will need to keep standing up and showing up for ourselves as well. This book has some ideas on how we can do that and prompts to help develop more of/on your own.

As an important reminder: I'm glad you're picking up this book to learn about trans youth and how to support them, but it is more important to listen to trans youth—especially the trans youth in *your* life—to find out what they want and need.

I do not fall into the category of transgender youth. Although I count myself as queer and agender and am secure in the many fields I occupy as an educator, parent, citizen, friend, mentor, and so on, this book is not about me. I share how we can hone our knowledge of how rhetoric works in the world, how we can use rhetoric ourselves, and how to look for and use resources on this journey. Although this book leads with love and I have broken down the issues to the best of my ability, I may be quickly outdated as gender issues move at a fast pace, or I may be wrong about issues, or your trans youth and I may differ on our understanding or importance of something. Listen to the trans youth in your life; they know better than I will ever do about what it is that matters to *them*.

*Let us begin!*



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How to unpack, understand, and communicate the key issues; how and where to seek out and create resources.



# 1

## Introduction

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## I “Protect Trans Youth”: Unpacking the Rhetoric of Trans Issues with Tenderness



Visual 1—Young people and children hold up posters urging us to protect trans youth outside a courthouse in Kentucky. A federal judge protected them by temporarily blocking a bill banning gender-affirming care for transgender youth. Illustration by Lainie Ettema.

I usually begin class meetings with a “check-in”—an informal and unstructured phase where I welcome students as they walk into our classroom and we settle in, greet people sitting around us, and generally check-in with each other. People may send shout-outs to members of the class who played in a concert or show or a game, announce upcoming events they might be involved

in, and as a way of easing into a critical thinking-learning space, share items in the news related to our study of literature and theory. In the fall of 2022, Isobel “Izzy” A, a student on our women’s basketball team, was eager to report that a senator in Arkansas had proposed a bill to “protect trans kids.” This sounded terrific and the class was in a celebratory mood until on looking up details, we realized that it was a reference to a bill proposed the previous year which aimed to “protect” trans kids from gender-affirming (and lifesaving) care set up by their families and doctors.

Misleadingly titled “Vulnerable Child Compassion and Protection Act,” the focus of the bill is described as one that “prohibits gender change therapy for minors, prohibits withholding of certain related information from parents” (Alabama State Legislature). This bill, despite its use of the word “compassion” in its title, is uncompassionate; it is the very opposite of what processes and protections trans youth advocates as well as expert organizations such as the American Academy of Pediatrics recommend as gender-affirming care as part of the best practices for the health and emotional well-being of trans youth. Other similar bills are Idaho’s Vulnerable Child Protection Act and Montana’s Youth Health Protection Act. Izzy’s innocent example and our class’s collective deflation and horror became an important lesson in how rhetoric can be a serious and slippery matter, how it can be used to obfuscate and mislead—in short, a reminder of how much rhetoric matters in the fight for trans human rights.

Protect trans youth from what?

Since the Fall of 2022, of course, things have snowballed. As of July 2023, there are approximately 530 anti-trans and anti-queer

bills in state legislatures across the United States with gender-affirming care, books, and even performing art being banned and criminalized. An NPR (National Public Radio) report in November 2022 notes that in the preceding two years, “state lawmakers introduced at least 306 bills targeting trans people, more than in any previous period” (Nakajima and Jin). Significantly, 86% of this legislation is directed against *trans youth*. This attack on gender-affirming care in over twenty-eight of fifty state legislatures in the United States constitutes a legitimate legislative crisis of existence. Trans youth experience this as a *literal* crisis of existence as of the 300,000 American youth aged 13–17 who identify as transgender, 53,800 are now at risk of losing validating gender-affirming medical care (Williams Institute 2022, 2023).

These attacks are particularly remarkable at a time when an increasing number of young people in the United States identify as transgender. The Williams Institute at UCLA (University of California, Los Angeles) estimates that there are 1.6 million transgender people aged 13 or older and that nearly one in five people who identify as transgender in the United States are between the ages of 13 and 17. The CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) noted that recent health surveys demonstrate that there is a generational shift in the number of people identifying as transgender in the United States. As the *New York Times* noted: “The analysis, relying on government health surveys conducted from 2017 to 2020, estimated that 1.4 percent of 13- to 17-year-olds and 1.3 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds were transgender, compared with about 0.5 percent of all adults” (Ghorayashi). For younger generations, explorations of gender have been made possible by social acceptance and the increased visibility of trans life experiences and resources available

in media such as books, movies, shows, and significantly on social media such as Instagram, Tumblr, and TikTok.

While only about 15% of the 306 bills have become law, the rhetorical amplification of debates on bathroom access, bans on gender-affirming care for trans minors, and moral panic about trans youth competing in school sports teams of their gender identity has been pervasive; it has led to a barrage of hostility and vilification in the public sphere. Naturally, this rhetorical negativity has “a negative impact for LGBTQ youth generally,” as Sam Ames, director of advocacy and government affairs at the Trevor Project, points out (Trevor News 2023). Whether or not the bills pass, “86% of transgender and nonbinary youth say recent debates around anti-trans bills have negatively impacted their mental health; as a result of these policies and debates in the last year, 45% of trans youth experienced cyberbullying, and nearly 1 in 3 reported not feeling safe to go to the doctor or hospital when they were sick or injured.” Additionally, “75% of LGBTQ youth say that both anti-LGBTQ hate crimes and threats of violence against LGBTQ spaces often give them stress or anxiety.” It has led to 45% of transgender youth experiencing online harassment, 24% experiencing additional bullying at school, and 42% have had to stop speaking to a family member influenced by anti-trans and transphobic politics.

Unfortunately, this rhetoric is not confined to the legislative and political sphere. Notable media groups, including print media, like the *The New York Times* (usually considered to be the paper of record), and social media such as Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, and Twitter, routinely misrepresent issues facing trans youth, which makes the careful reading and parsing of media rhetoric important as well (Migdon, GLAAD Letter). Noting the trend of anti-trans

disinformation spread by mainstream media, the satirical website *The Onion* correctly summed up, it would seem as though “It Is Journalism’s Sacred Duty To Endanger The Lives Of As Many Trans People As Possible.” News stories and posts from social media go on to resurface as resources and research in political grandstanding and discriminatory legislation in a cyclic spiral of transphobia. Even worse, as an open letter to the CEOs (chief executive officers) of Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, and Twitter cites, dangerous posts have inspired “terrifying real-life harm” such as bomb threats and death threats to children’s hospitals and care providers who offer healthcare for trans youth (GLAAD Letter). Anti-trans and transphobic *rhetoric* thus generate much of the harm and hurt experienced by trans people and the people who care for and love them.

But wait, there’s hope. Change takes time and effort but *is possible*. Trans advocates are constantly engaged in fighting back and we can join them. A quick look at the ACLU (American Civil Liberties Union) update for today shows that families in Idaho are suing to block the ban on gender-affirming healthcare for trans youth and the Oklahoma Attorney General has been persuaded to sign a nonenforcement agreement on gender-affirming healthcare for trans youth. So far, as of June 2023, six anti-trans bills have been challenged in court and have been struck down by justices. Several other bills have been reversed in their nascent state by public hearings and website feedback.

In 2022, the nonpartisan Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) poll reported that Americans’ support for LGBTQIA+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual; the plus sign denotes other identities not explicitly listed) rights continues to tick upward and that nearly eight in ten Americans back

nondiscrimination protections for LGBTQIA+ people (PRRI). That includes 65% of Republicans. Just a couple of years ago, a 2021 poll by PBS (Public Broadcasting Service) NewsHour/NPR found that two-thirds of Americans opposed bills limiting the rights of transgender people (PBS). Overall, the poll found that 54% of Americans oppose laws that ban gender-affirming medical care. Families and communities are fighting back by understanding the ways in which rhetoric is being (mis)used and they are doing it by tapping into the resources in place while creating their own and fostering hope.

Rather than a mere “wish” for something to improve, hope can be the possibility for change that inspires us to work toward it. As the activist Mariame Kaba reminds us, “hope is a form of discipline” that leads us to work for a better world. In an interview, Kaba reminds us about how “It’s work to be hopeful. It’s not like a fuzzy feeling. Like, you have to actually put in energy, time, and you have to be clear-eyed, and you have to hold fast to having a vision. It’s a hard thing to maintain. But it matters to have it, to believe that it’s possible, to change the world. You know, that we don’t live in a predetermined, predestined world where like nothing we do has an impact. No, no, that’s not true!” (Kaba and Scahill). As Kaba suggests in her book *We Do This ‘Til We Free Us*, rather than succumb to hate ourselves or fall into despair, we can let our struggle radicalize us and work with hope.

A lot of the “trans panic” against trans people and youth is fueled by faked concern and false propagandist rhetorics such as disinformation (dehumanizing fallacies about trans people), mislabeling (calling harmful action “protecting,” for instance), and silencing and erasure (intended to remove trans voices from the

discourse). These are harmful and negative rhetorics which we have to proactively—and radically—counter with useful and positive rhetorics in the public spheres and spaces we inhabit. We look at and learn from case studies and best practices for these rhetorics. It is important to know—to *hope*—that it is possible to push back, be heard, and make a better world that enables trans people to thrive and protects trans youth, where necessary, in authentic, compassionate ways that affirm their rights, existence, and joy. This will require us to interfere, disrupt, and amend the oppression and precariousness trans children experience and replace them with radical tenderness.

But first, what do we mean by “tenderness?” This book proceeds from the conviction that youth everywhere—and this naturally includes transgender youth too—deserve unconditional love and that we do this by supporting their journeys of self-discovery and authentic life. The late, great June Jordan diagnoses the human condition resonantly by summarizing: “None of us has experienced enough tenderness.” Transgender youth are particularly vulnerable to this lack of tenderness; they form one of the most stigmatized, misunderstood, and misrepresented groups in the United States. Compared to general youth populations, trans youth are at heightened risk for bullying, homelessness, suicide, and survival sex; they lack political representation (either through being too young to vote or due to discrimination) and are dependent on their families, schools, and communities to support them.

Guided by tenderness as a key tenet, this book focuses on those three formative spaces—family, school, and community—to discover and strategize how we can stand by trans youth in support.

The chapters that follow center around family, school, and community and they each focus on rhetorics and resources specific to the space. Each chapter addresses (1) critical and theoretical thinking around reading, rhetoric, and communication (what do people mean when they say they want to “protect” trans teens? Do they mean to be supportive and gender-affirming or regulate trans people out of existence?); (2) examples and explanations of specific rhetorical practices; (3) educational and advocacy resources (these may include national and local groups; learning spaces and voices, funding); and (4) an inset at the end of each section has suggestions and reminders to exercise trans joy in the journey through this book. The learning objective is to prepare those voicing tenderness and love for trans youth not merely to be up-to-date on current messaging and resources through reading and working through the sections of this book, but to become prepared to read through future (legislative/journalistic/social) rhetoric and act forcefully and resourcefully in the future.

This space is unapologetically pro trans; we will not be arguing for the humanity of trans people here. The primary directive is to help affirm and support trans youth in various areas (family, school, community) where we may engage as responsible and compassionate caregivers. In every manner possible, this book privileges the voice of trans communities and trans elders in order to access the best possible resources, advice, and wisdom—and also to avoid speaking for and over populations who are the best people to represent themselves. Transgender people are, naturally, the experts on transgender issues; Hil Malatino speaks movingly about the logistics and details of trans care itself as a way of

“making community.” This book is rooted in my outsider-insider adult perspective of someone who is socially identified as cis, but self-identifies as agender. It is rooted in my experiences as someone who has the privilege of witnessing and helping trans youth within family, at school, and in community. While it would be offensive, obnoxious, and appropriative to speak *for* other people, it is nevertheless radical and crucial to stand against hate, to stand with love, and for all of us to advocate for each other. Nadal et al. point out how important it is to speak up, especially if you are not the people affected by oppression and microaggression, as these voices can be heard as less biased and thereby can travel farther and be heard more clearly and help to combat invisibility (Nadal et al., Gossett et al.).

As a further note on the philosophy of this work, the title seeks to evoke the idea of transformation in a series of modes. “Transgender,” often shortened to “trans,” encompasses a range of connotation from transitioning and transgression to translation and transience and to outdated and sometimes offensive words (transvestite, transsexual). In this work, there are four overlapping and rippling ways in which I visualize trans(formation).

*Transformation:* Trans existence can itself be a mode of radical and magical renewal, not merely in physical form and presentation but also in the movement from fear and repression to authenticity and expression. *What if trans youth were able to think about themselves as plenitudes of possibility without the constant drumbeat of hostility and precarity?*

*Trans-formation:* Second, the idea of “formation” crucial in youth-facing theory and practice—the German word “bildung” is

often translated as formation or development—is a principal idea to remind us that trans youth are engaged in a process of learning about and developing into what is right for them. Our job as adults might simply be to support their learning and development. *What if we validated the knowledge trans youth have of themselves and provided access to trans elders and trans communities they could learn from?*

*Transform:* Next, I want to hold open the possibility of tenderness and acceptance as transformative and revolutionizing rhetorical practices. *What might happen if we trust the trans youth in our orbit instead of debating them?*

*Trans/Trance:* Finally, to hold out an aspirational possibility of trans identity as a transcendent epiphanic experience of belonging and connection—akin to Sufi modes of contentment and certainty. *What if being trans was a celebratory experience that promoted and heightened joy?*

Who are the trans youth we seek to benefit? As the Williams study we referenced shows, there are an increasing number of youth in the United States who identify as transgender, but even those numbers may not give us a full picture. A number of youth may identify as gender nonconforming or gender expansive, as “transgender” is widely seen as a broad, umbrella term pertaining to anyone whose gender is different from the one assigned to them at birth. This would include a variety of identities, including those who are nonbinary, agender, gender fluid, gender queer, and so on.

The extensive and sometimes neologistic vocabulary trans communities have constructed to express themselves in a cis world

can seem intimidating. The essential concern however is simple: people are experiencing a mismatch between their internal and intuitive sense of who they are and the way society has perceived and assigned them. Trans identity reflects, acknowledges, and celebrates this simple truth. Many of us grow up with gender presented as a binary—you're either this or that, female or male, boy or girl. A lot of this is predicated on questions such as do you have a vagina or do you have a penis? In the case of intersex people, determinations are made along this binary rubric in a procrustean mode even if such uniformity is uncomfortable and inapplicable. Feminism has pushed back against the idea that gender is binary, and recent science backs up the idea of multiple, complex ideas of gender. An online gender test (take it!) can help illustrate gender as a continuum rather than a binary (Greenberg and Muir). Biological sex is considered to be more than merely a question of whether there is a penis or not, but in addition to such "physical" markers of sex, one could be "genetically male or female, chromosomally male or female, hormonally male/female/non-binary, with cells that may or may not hear the male/female/non-binary call, and all this leading to a body that can be male/non-binary/female" (Ainsworth, Helm). Gender is often presented to us as a central social binary, but it is so much more as cultural and scientific theory demonstrates. In addition, it is individualistic: as Tey Meadow suggests, "gender is ... an iterative, interactive process, constantly in negotiation among individuals" (11). Additionally, many of us may choose to live outside of this binary, whether we believe that there should be no binary or because we do not fit neatly within the binary (Ainsworth, Butler).