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Abstract

This article uses a metanarrative of a fictional, gender identity minority community college student (named Zyx) to elucidate and humanize the experiences that students in this population undergo throughout the course of their college career. Using a journal entry format, Zyx (they/them) is followed from the day before their first day at school through to their graduation. Their experience includes being first-generation and mixed race, living through COVID-19, coping with academic failure, and ultimately triumphing over adversity. The story is meant to cover some of the myriad obstacles to success faced by gender identity minorities attending community college while also highlighting their strength, resilience, and humanity. The metanarrative can be read as a stand-alone piece of fiction, but it is also data-driven and has extensive footnotes that explain where the fictional ideas came from including academic and informal research, anecdotal evidence, and stories shared by trans*-spectrum community college students.

Keywords

metanarrative, transgender, trans*-spectrum, community college, COVID-19

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Marrying a Good Story and a Well-Formed Argument: The Metanarrative of Zyx

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This article uses a metanarrative of a fictional, gender identity minority community college student (named Zyx) to elucidate and humanize the experiences that students in this population undergo throughout the course of their college career. Using a journal entry format, Zyx (they/them) is followed from the day before their first day at school through to their graduation. Their experience includes being first-generation and mixed race, living through COVID-19, coping with academic failure, and ultimately triumphing over adversity. The story is meant to cover some of the myriad obstacles to success faced by gender identity minorities attending community college while also highlighting their strength, resilience, and humanity. The metanarrative can be read as a stand-alone piece of fiction, but it is also data-driven and has extensive footnotes that explain where the fictional ideas came from including academic and informal research, anecdotal evidence, and stories shared by trans*-spectrum community college students.

Keywords: metanarrative, transgender, trans*-spectrum, community college, COVID-19

The Importance of Stories

Narrative inquiry is simply a “way of understanding human experience through stories” (Kim, 2016, p. 190). Put another way:

It come[s] out of a view of human experience in which humans, individually and socially, lead storied lives. People shape their daily lives by stories of who they and others are and as they interpret their past in terms of these stories. Story . . . is a portal through which a person enters the world and by which [their] experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful. (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 477)

However, narrative inquiry is neither simple nor does it entail a singular way of knowing. Bruner (1986) posited that people have “two modes of thought, each providing distinctive ways of ordering experience, of constructing reality” (p. 11). While these two modes—the paradigmatic and the narrative—are distinct and unique, “ignor[ing] one at the expense of the other inevitably [will cause a person to] fail to capture the rich diversity of thought” in human experience (Bruner, 1986, p. 11).

According to Bruner (1986), “the paradigmatic or logico-scientific [mode] attempts to fulfill the ideal of a formal, mathematical system of description and explanation” (p. 12).

It establishes formal and empirical proof by creating well-formed arguments ...
[I]t relies on theory, scientific analysis, logic, empirical evidence, and

discovery. . . It is concerned with an effort to fit particular, individual details into a larger pattern. (Kim, 2016, pp. 10–11)

However, while an application of the paradigmatic can lead to “good theory, tight analysis, logical proof, sound argument, and empirical discovery,” it cannot replace artistic imagination (Bruner, 1986, p. 13).

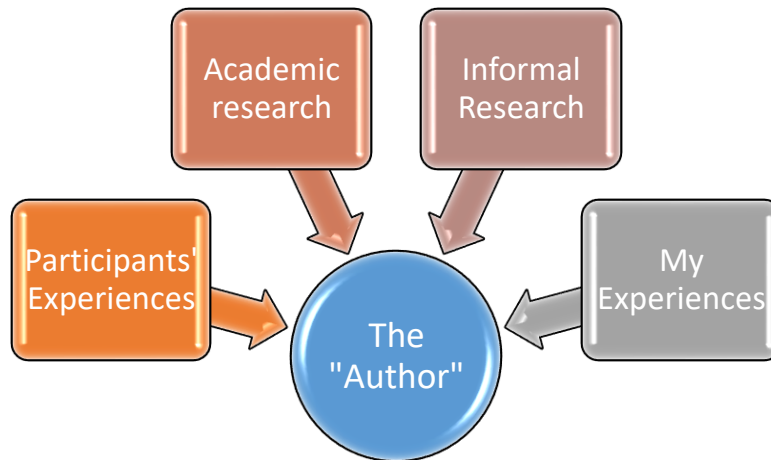
The narrative mode, in contrast, leads to “good stories, gripping drama, [and] believable (though not necessarily “true”) historical accounts” (Bruner, 1986, p. 13). It:

Establishes verisimilitude by creating good stories that are lifelike [and attempts] to understand the meaning of human actions and experiences, the changes and challenges of life events, and the differences and complexities of people’s actions. . . It incorporates the feelings, goals, perceptions, and values of the people whom we want to understand. (Kim, 2016, pp. 10–11)

As a scholar, I tend to prefer the paradigmatic way of presenting data since I tend to be a logical, hyper-organized thinker and writer. Also, as a cisgender researcher who writes about trans*-spectrum individuals, I always want to make sure that I “get it right.” As such, I try to ground my work in scientific theory and empirical research. However, the experiences and stories of transgender individuals do not have a “definite answer” or an “objective truth” (Kim, 2016, p. 11), and they certainly do not follow only one plot. Sadly, though, scholarship on the LGBTQIA+ population—like most traditionally marginalized and minoritized groups—has lacked complexity (when it exists at all). In the rare instances where this group has *not* been overlooked and underrepresented in the literature, they have historically been lumped together (e.g., *all* sexual orientation and gender identity minoritized individuals in one study) and the research has focused on a singular, mostly “mournful” narrative (Marine & Nicolazzo, 2014). Thus, telling their stories through the paradigmatic mode alone could be seen as “too measured, too fixed, and somewhat impersonal” (Bruce et al., 2016, p. 3), thereby necessitating an inclusion of the narrative mode with its complicated, nuanced, messy, and yet beautiful take on human experience. While a “good story and a well-formed argument are different natural kinds” (Bruner, 1986, p. 11), their marriage can help researchers come closer to the “truth” of human stories.

Metanarrative

A metanarrative is an “overarching . . . grand stor[y] that hold social [value] and power” (Bruce et al., 2016, p. 4) and exists outside a single person. Bruce et al. (2016) argue that metanarratives are anchors, helping us make sense of complicated information. They are, fundamentally, stories. In the case here, I see my fictional story’s “author” as deriving from many authors: (1) my dissertation participants who shared with me their experiences of being trans*-spectrum community college students; (2) all the formal, academic research on higher education and LGBTQIA+ issues that I read while writing my dissertation; (3) informal research into relevant topics related to the narrative; and (4) my experiences as a cisgender, heterosexual woman who has been a community college professor and administrator for twenty years and who seeks to be an ally. Somewhere amid these myriad authors (see Figure 1) lies the “true” fictional author of this fictional—and yet, in some sense, truer than true—tale of Zyx, a fictional trans*-spectrum community college student, presented below.

Figure 1*The "Author" of This Story*

A Note on How to Read the Metanarrative

The story of Zyx (they/them), a fictional trans*-spectrum community college student, is below. The journal entries follow them from the day before their first day at school through to their graduation. I recommend that you read the text in its entirety first as it is a story and meant to be read as such. Only then should you delve into the footnotes. They denote which of the “authors” from above informed that part of the story, and they elaborate on the topic brought up in the journal. The combination of formal and informal, empirical and personal, staid and stirring will hopefully compel all readers to find something they can identify with in the story of Zyx.

The Story of Zyx

Fall Semester 2017

August 27, 2017

Am I actually doing this? Am I actually going to be a college student?!

This whole process is so overwhelming. It’d be so much easier if I had friends at this school, but none of my online friends live around here. I mean, shit, most of them don’t even live in the U.S.! I suppose some people from my high school go to this community college, but we graduated 2 years ago,¹ so who even knows. Besides, they were all assholes anyway who made fun of my hair and clothes. They all looked like boring-ass clones of one another, and they called me names?! Ugh. Screw that. I hope I don’t run into any of them. That would suck.

I’m also kinda freaking out about the bathroom situation.² I saw on the college’s website that there are handicap-accessible bathrooms that might be gender inclusive, but I don’t really

¹ **Academic research:** Graduating high school students are twice as likely to attend a 4-year institution than a 2-year school if they go to college immediately after graduating (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], n.d.).

² **Academic research:** Multiple studies have found that accessing/using gender-neutral (or gender-inclusive) facilities on college campuses can be difficult and/or frightening (e.g., Beemyn et al., 2005; Clark, 2020; Johnston, 2016; McCormick, 2019). Quantitative data from the *National Transgender Discrimination Survey* showed that

know. And they are in the library and none of my classes are in the library.³ What if I don't have enough time between classes to find a safe bathroom?⁴ I refuse to relive that situation at that concert where that scary dude got in my face about the bathroom I was using.⁵ That was terrifying. But also, really stupid. He doesn't know my gender. Hell, I'm not even sure myself right now.⁶ And maybe I was in that line because it was shorter! Whatever. It's none of his fucking business. I just know I don't want to be in a situation where someone gets aggressive with me. I just want to figure things out on my own without feeling like I'm gonna be in danger.⁷ Is that so much to ask??

Maybe I should change my schedule so that I have time between classes to go off campus. I think there are some fast-food places nearby. They sometimes have gender-neutral bathrooms. It's tough, though, because my work schedule is so tight. I have to work at least 30 hours a week to pay my bills,⁸ but I also have to keep a certain GPA to keep my financial aid.⁹

there is a statistically significant relationship between being denied bathroom access due to being transgender and lifetime suicide attempts (Seelman, 2016).

³ **Academic research:** Gender-neutral facilities can be “sparse, inconveniently located, unavailable during certain hours, [or even] nonexistent” (Samoff, 2018, p. 162). Studies have shown that transgender individuals *do* use gender-neutral facilities, but that there are not enough of them in certain areas on campus (Lewis, 2016) and they have to rely on word of mouth and mere luck to find them (Humiston, 2017). Still further, the location of appropriate bathroom facilities on campus in part dictated what classes trans* student chose (Humiston, 2017).

⁴ **Academic research:** Goldberg et al. (2019) found that for 507 trans* and gender nonconforming students, gender-inclusive bathroom access had the highest importance score with a mean score of 2.77 on a scale where 1=not important, 2=somewhat important, and 3=very important; yet only 22.7% of community college respondents were aware of such facilities on their campus.

⁵ **My experience:** A friend of mine who identifies as a cisgender woman and presents on the masculine end of androgynous has shared several stories with me about using the women's bathroom and being aggressively confronted about it. As such, she often has anxiety about choosing a bathroom and the possible negative consequences of doing so.

Participant: “There have been situations [that] could have maybe gotten dangerous. But typically, I would just err on the side of caution. I'm not inviting violence into my life. Even if I feel like I should have the right to use the bathroom if that's how I feel. . . [One time,] I was using the bathroom and I went to wash my hands and the janitor looks at me and goes, ‘Why don't you just use the women's bathroom?’ Because I'm not a woman. Or I wouldn't be in here” (Schutte, 2022, p. 243).

⁶ **Academic research:** Generationally, the number of individuals identifying as “unsure” or “questioning” of their gender identity is consistent: Baby Boomers, 2%; Generation X, 3%; Millennials, 2% (Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD; 2017). Note: data was unavailable for the percentage of Gen Zers who are unsure or questioning. Unfortunately, mainstream data collection organizations such as Gallup still conflate sexual and gender identities resulting in inaccurate and/or incomplete numbers.

Participant: “I was questioning for a while, but roughly, I will say about five years ago, I started questioning [my gender identity]. Because I always never really felt comfortable with all the labels that was put on me when I did used to identify as a lesbian. And I thought that's what I thought I had to identify as. And I didn't ever feel comfortable with that label” (Schutte, 2022, p. 171).

⁷ **Academic research:** Trans*-spectrum folx deal with “[v]iolence and discrimination . . . of pandemic proportions” (Catalano & Shlasko, 2013, p. 425). According to the FBI's Uniform Crime Reporting, crimes against transgender and gender nonconforming individuals are increasing; in 2015, there were 122 victims of hate crimes; in 2016, there were 131; in 2017, 132; in 2018, 189; and in 2019 (the most recent year for which data are available), 198 (United States Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI], 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019). On Transgender Day of Remembrance, November 20, 2021, President Biden stated that 2021 was the “deadliest year on record for transgender Americans” (*Statement by President Biden*, 2021).

⁸ **Academic research:** According to the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC; 2021), of the community college students attending full-time, 62% also work; for those attending part-time, 72% do.

⁹ **Academic research:** In 2021, a full 73% community college students applied for any kind of aid, with 62% applying for federal financial aid (including Pell Grants, work study, etc.; AACC, 2021).

Participant: “[I]t was definitely a juggle between work and school. There were days where literally I would come to school in my work clothes. . . I was juggling that balance between work and college. I definitely came [to school] exhausted. I guess that's why I didn't give it my 100[%]” (Schutte, 2022, p. 170).

Participant: “For a little while there I was going to [school and working on campus], but I was homeless. . . I was good in school. That was the one thing I was solidly good at. . . I would just walk around all night or I would

At least that's what I read on the website. I don't even know what exactly that means, and I can't ask my parents because it's not like they went to college.¹⁰ They think taking three classes will be easy, but that doesn't sound easy to me! Besides, what do they know?

Shit. Now I'm freaking out again. I was starting to get excited to get my life started, to start getting on the right track, and now I'm just afraid. I mean, what am I even gonna tell people my name is?¹¹ I fucking hate my name. At least my friends online call me by my nickname. Am I allowed to ask my professors to call me that?¹² I tried googling it and there's all these articles about what I should call my professor. "Dr." "Professor." By their first name.¹³ I didn't even consider that! But there's not a lot about chosen names. I heard that Trump is trying to make it okay to discriminate in school based on gender identity.¹⁴ So maybe I shouldn't even say anything?

My college's website has a thing about changing your name officially, but the form only mentions if you get married or whatever. So, what about me? And there's no place to state pronouns.¹⁵ Not that I'm even sure which ones I want people to use, but that's a whole other thing.

All I know is that it's 2017 and the first day of the fall semester—my first day in college ever—starts tomorrow. *Holy shit.*

hang out in abandoned buildings or climb a tree and sleep in the graveyard or stuff. Whatever worked at the time" (Schutte, 2022, p. 151).

¹⁰ **Academic research:** Almost one-third of community college students (29%) are first-generation (AACC, 2021).

¹¹ **Academic research:** The use of a trans*-spectrum youth's chosen name in multiple contexts—home, school, work, and with friends—results in fewer depressive symptoms, reduced suicidal ideation and behaviors, and fewer instances of poor mental health (Russell et al., 2018). Likewise, Lewis's (2016) qualitative study showed names/pronouns had the most significant impact on a student's college experience.

¹² **Academic research:** Less than 30% of students attending two-year public institutions were aware of their school having a name change policy as compared to 42.3% of their peers at public four-year schools (Goldberg et al., 2019).

¹³ **Academic research:** While there is much research on the topic, there is a distinct lack of official policies regarding what students should call their professors, which is often confusing for students. One study found that only 0.03% of students said that their professors asked to be called by a specific term of address (MacNell et al., 2014; Takiff et al., 2001). Many factors must be considered: the gender of both the faculty member and student (Grauerholz, 1989; Rubin, 1981), the age/experience of faculty (Ellis & Travis, 2007; Rubin, 1981; Takiff et al., 2001), the level of education of the students and/or the subject matter being taught (McDowell & Westman, 2005; Sebastian & Bristow, 2008), the size of the school (Takiff et al., 2001), the type of institution (Wei & Hendrix, 2016), geography (Patton, 2012), how long the parties have known each other (McDowell & Westman, 2005), and campus culture (Ellis & Travis, 2007; Takiff, et al., 2001).

¹⁴ **Academic research:** In 2016, President Obama's U.S. Departments of Justice and Education argued that they would "treat a student's gender identity as the student's sex for purposes of Title IX and its implementing regulations" meaning students could not be "exclude[d], separate[d], den[ied] benefits . . . or otherwise treat[ed] differently" (Lhamon & Gupta, 2016, p. 2). However, in 2017, President Trump's administration reversed this interpretation, arguing that "'sex' unambiguously refers to biological sex" (Battle & Wheeler, 2017, p. 1) leaving trans*-spectrum students vulnerable to harassment, threats, and assault, and calling into question their very right to exist.

¹⁵ **Academic research:** Several studies have shown that faculty taking attendance can be anxiety-inducing for trans* students due to a fear of being outed (Samoff, 2018; Seelman, 2013). On the first day of class, it can exacerbate feelings of marginalization (Clark, 2020; Schutte, 2020), as individuals desire a balance between wanting to be correctly gendered by others with a need for privacy (Goldberg & Kivalanka, 2018). Many studies have found that correct pronouns and names are a factor in classroom experience (Beemyn, 2015; Goldberg & Kivalanka, 2018; Samoff, 2018; Walker-Payne, 2019).

Spring Semester 2018

April 9, 2018

Is the semester over yet? I'm way too tired for a 19-year-old. Though, in my defense, I *am* taking six credits and working practically full time. Besides, I want to actually do well in my classes this semester. Like an idiot, I listened to the advisor who told me that I should take nine credits my first semester.¹⁶ Actually, I don't think it was the number of credits. It was more the classes. Telling me to take English 101, Psychology 101, AND a class in my major? Whose bright idea was that?¹⁷ That's *a lot* of writing. It really sucks, actually, because I'm pretty sure I could have gotten an A in my English class if I just had enough time to write my papers. And I really loved my psych class, but it was way too much reading. My professor seems like a good guy, but he mentioned several things that make it pretty clear to me that he never had to work while he was going to school, so he doesn't understand what I'm going through.¹⁸ I try to read my textbook at work, but I never remember anything and then my boss gets pissed.¹⁹

To be honest, after all that, I was pretty happy to get two Cs and a B. But this semester I'm really trying to get A's in both my classes. I'm not sure it's going to happen, though. My math professor seems really old school and cranky and isn't open to people even asking questions in class. He just writes shit on the board and has his back to us the whole time. He can't even see when students raise their hands. And maybe that's the point because when people yell out questions, he just pauses for a second, kind of snorts, and keeps writing.²⁰ I failed my first test and got really nervous about failing the class, so I went up to him after class and he sort of yelled, "That's what office hours are for!" That really confused me because I thought office hours were time for faculty to get *their* work done.²¹ So I literally googled "What are office hours?" and apparently, they are times you can go ask your professors questions. Why didn't anybody ever tell me about that?!

¹⁶ **Academic research:** The Center for Community College Student Engagement's (2017) research suggests that 2-year students who take at least one semester of a full courseload (i.e., at least 12 credits) tend to be more successful at passing gateway courses such as math and English and persisting to the next semester; significantly, this study showed attending full-time in the "first" semester resulted in greater rates of graduation (38%) than attending part-time (31%). The importance of achieving "academic momentum" (McKinney et al., 2022) may explain why an advisor would encourage a student to take a more difficult or heavier course load in their first semester. However, Attewell and Monaghan (2016) found that the benefits of doing so are negated if that student is working more than 30 hours a week.

¹⁷ **My experience:** My students often express that they were encouraged by advisors to take multiple general education courses in their first semester, resulting in failed courses or substandard grades.

¹⁸ **Informal research:** I was unable to find statistics on the percentage of college faculty who are first generation or who did not have to work during college, but faculty who "do" identify as first-generation state that they focus on the "hidden curriculum and . . . issues of equity and inequity" (Elizabeth Montañó as cited in UC Davis, 2019, para. 1). It is possible that faculty who have not have this experience are not as aware of the challenge of "balanc[ing] college, several jobs, and home responsibilities" (Martinez, 2017, para. 5).

¹⁹ **Academic research:** While studies have shown mixed results about the efficacy of multi-tasking, Cho et al. (2015) found that "completing a secondary task impaired reading comprehension performance for both factual and conceptual questions" (p. 101).

²⁰ **My experience:** Unfortunately, over the years, many students have expressed witnessing this kind of behavior from some faculty, which results in feelings of alienation and insecurity about their ability to pass the class.

Academic research: STEM faculty may be less likely to be supportive of LGBTQIA+ students since they are less likely to learn about feminist or queer theories because "a course that considers issues of gender . . . is not required for success in the discipline" (Sallee, 2011, p. 184).

²¹ **My experience:** Several students (usually first generation) have told me that, until I explained office hours in class, they did not know that they were meant as extra support for students. Instead, they thought posted office hours were the times they should "not" go to their professor's office because they would be interrupting their work.

That made me feel really dumb, so I went to the college’s website and searched for services available to students. There’s no way I’m going to my professor’s office hours. He might yell at me or snort at me or something worse. He seems a little lechy and creepy with some students, and I definitely heard him mutter an anti-gay slur under his breath when one of my classmates pointed out a mistake he made on the board. So yeah—no way I’m asking *that* guy for help. But apparently, there’s all sorts of free support that you can get on campus. I ended up going to the tutoring center for help with math and they were *so amazing*. Not only did they have all different kinds of math help, but they had all these signs about inclusivity and acceptance.²² Honestly, it made me feel really good. It was the first time I felt comfortable at this school. I’m still not even going to the bathroom on campus in case someone gives me a hard time but seeing those signs low-key made me feel a little safer. And maybe when I figure out my identity, I can actually be that person on campus.

I was feeling discouraged earlier or maybe I was just tired—I worked the late shift last night—but now that I think about it, I’m feeling a little better. I mean, eight months ago I wasn’t even sure I could be a college student and now (well, assuming I pass both my classes this semester) I’m a quarter of the way done with my associate’s. How cool would it be to be the first person in my family to get a degree?!²³

Spring Semester 2019

May 18, 2019

Well, I finally made it to the end of the semester. It was *rough*. But I’m done. Last fall I tried to take three classes, but I ended up failing one, so I only took one class this semester.²⁴ If I’m being perfectly honest with myself, I let the whole self-medicating-to-cope thing get out of control.²⁵ Drinking makes me feel good. It makes me forget that I’m confused, and that people sometimes stare at me and call me names. And it makes it *so* much easier to talk to other people. I took Psych 101 last fall and I think maybe I’m a little bit autistic? I don’t know, but the description sounded awfully familiar.²⁶ Maybe that’s why I find it so hard to connect with

²² **Participant:** “[Seeing a Safe Zone Ally sticker on a campus student service coordinator’s door] was a huge thing. At the time, I wasn’t comfortable explaining why [when] I saw it I started crying and smiling and stuff. But it meant a lot to me because it was like, ‘Okay, this person isn’t going to judge me. I’m okay here’” (Schutte, 2022, p. 206).

²³ **Academic research:** Transgender individuals have higher rates of educational attainment than the general population: 47% have a college or graduate degree as compared to 27% of the general population (Grant et al., 2011). For adults without a college-educated parent, 26% earn at least a bachelors (Fry, 2021).

²⁴ **Academic research:** Community college students often vary the number of courses they are taking at a time. Data from the U.S. Department of Education’s 2016 *National Postsecondary Student Aid Study* suggests that 20% of students attending two-year public schools were not exclusively full- or part-time (as cited in Beer, n.d.).

²⁵ **Academic research:** *The National Transgender Discrimination Survey* found that 8% of participants were currently using alcohol or drugs to cope with the mistreatment they received due to their gender identity and 18% had in the past (Grant et al., 2011).

Participant: “I had my substance issues at an early age, like, teenage years. I didn’t know how to express myself at the time. I knew I was different, and I was just using drugs to cope with whatever, to cope with what I was dealing with at the time, and I was in denial about it for so long. I just used drugs and alcohol to cope with the pain” (Schutte, 2022, p. 127).

Participant: “I had a huge alcohol problem. . . Literally there were months where I was not sober. I woke up and I took a shot and then I started doing stuff for the day. . . I got alcohol poisoning and almost died” (Schutte, 2022, p. 150–151).

²⁶ **Academic research:** The research on the overlap of an autism diagnosis or traits and identifying as transgender is very new. A quite recent study of 727 individuals found a “substantial overlap between trans identity and autism” (Murphy et al., 2020, p. 9; see also Warrier et al., 2020). That same study found that 10.3% of cisgender participants met the cut-off score on the Autism-Spectrum Quotient (AQ-50) as compared to 40.3% of the

other people. Or maybe it's just because I don't have anything in common with my classmates. I just thought that I could drink and smoke a little and it would be all good, but it's getting out of control. Like, I'm drinking practically every night and blacking out sometimes. It's actually a miracle that I passed two of my classes, but my professors were cool. I told one of them that I think I might be an alcoholic and she was really supportive and even gave me the phone number of a counselor. I hate talking on the phone, though.

I guess I can talk to my Discord friends about it.²⁷ At least they get me. I'm so glad I finally left Facebook. I swear, every queer-focused group on FB was just a bunch of bi White chicks fetishizing themselves to get more likes.²⁸ So gross. Nobody seemed to be going through what I'm going through. It's hard enough being mixed race,²⁹ but then to not even really know what my gender is? I mean, damn. It's just not easy.

I will say this, though: my parents have been super-cool. They actually try really hard to get my pronouns right. They fuck up a lot, but they *are* trying. It's so freeing to be able to present how I want when I'm at home. I can actually wear the clothes I want and do my hair however I feel like and wear make-up or not, and no one is going to say anything. I don't feel like I can be out at school and so I have to be confined to this tiny little box of what other people think I am and should be . . . just thinking about it makes me want a drink. Shit. I'm trying to be good. I just get so anxious and nervous when I think about other people staring at me and judging me and wondering about me.³⁰

Speaking of judging me . . . I really could kill my sister sometimes. She's always so perfect and everyone thinks she's hot shit. But when I came out as nonbinary, she had to make the whole thing about her and how people are gonna judge *her*. What does my expression have to do with her? If my Nannie can accept it (sort of), why can't she? I don't get how other people think who I am impacts them. I'm just trying to figure who I am, just like everyone else. Why is it okay for other people to play around with hair color and change their major and shit like that, but she can't be supportive of her own sibling trying to figure out something really

transgender participants (Murphy et al., 2020). Trans* males (assigned female at birth) were twice as likely to have “clinically significant levels of autistic traits” compared to cisgender women (Nobili et al., 2018, para. 29; see also Murphy et al., 2020).

Academic research: There is overlap between individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and attendance at a community college. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES; 2011), 70% of public two-year institutions reported enrolling students with autism, and 2% of the student population at community colleges have ASD. Wei et al.'s (2014) study found that 81% of college students with ASD attended a community college at some point in their college careers (see also Roux et al., 2015).

²⁷ **My experience:** Almost all of my participants mentioned the importance of Discord in their lives. Discord is “an online chat and messaging platform designed to be used by groups. Since it is invite-only, it is a secure space for [individuals] to interact without the need to be in the room together physically” (Edwards, 2021, para. 4). According to the company's website, “Discord servers are organized into topic-based channels where [users] can collaborate, share, and just talk about [their] day without clogging up a group chat” (Discord, n.d.).

Participant: “I think that definitely I have had a much easier time finding people online that I have more in common with” (Schutte, 2022, p. 117).

²⁸ **My experience:** In a conversation not officially part of my dissertation, one of my participants mentioned that most online queer spaces tend to be very homogenous.

²⁹ **Academic research:** More and more individuals are identifying as mixed race; “multiracial Americans are one of the fastest-growing populations in the United States, growing at a rate approximately three times the national average” (Hermsmeyer et al., 2021, para. 5). The United States Department of Education (2019) reported that those identifying as “two or more races” were the second largest racial group to attend college.

³⁰ **Academic research:** The Trevor Project (2021) reported that “72% of LGBTQ youth reported symptoms of generalized anxiety disorder in the past two weeks, including more than 3 in 4 transgender and nonbinary youth” (p. 4).

important that actually matters? Honestly, I'm not sure if I'm mad or sad. I guess I should just be happy that my parents are pretty cool and that I found my people online.³¹

And school's just school. I just gotta get through it. This is, what, my fourth semester, I think? I've only failed one class. That's not too bad considering everything. But I think I probably need to stop drinking so much. I used *ratemyprofessors.com* to find a decent math teacher,³² but 9am is too damn early and I've barely made it to class these past few weeks. But I'm trying.

Spring Semester 2020

April 23, 2020

Well, the world is coming to an end. So that's happening. This COVID thing is *nuts*.

Last spring semester did not end well. I passed my one class *barely*, but my drinking really got out of control and my parents confronted me about it and made me get help. So, I took last semester off, did some group therapy, actually talked to my sister about how I was feeling, started hiking a lot . . . yeah, it was good. I was actually feeling healthy.

And one of the people in my group therapy was really cool and we started hanging out, which was awesome. (Am I blushing?) And they told me that they are genderqueer. That was a new term for me. We talked a lot about it, but I also did a bunch of research and found out all sorts of new things.³³ It's kind of amazing all the resources that exist for those of us who aren't all Suzie Cheerleader or Johnny Football. I cannot even image what it was like to be like me before the internet. Like, seriously. How did those people even survive? I guess a lot of them didn't.

And speaking of surviving . . . holy world pandemic. I think the U.S. is now the world leader in cases. That is so scary. And apparently Trump cut off money to the World Health Organization?!³⁴ Like, seriously?!

It felt really weird to be back in a classroom after taking a semester off. I'm only taking one class again because I felt like I needed to ease back into being a student, but I am worried about how long it's going to take me to graduate. I mean, I'm already behind because I have to work and can't take a full load and I failed that class and I'm only taking one now . . . damn. I'm getting bogged down in the depressing stuff again.

³¹ **Academic research:** Many transgender and gender nonconforming individuals use the internet in order to find information, community, and affirmation (Goldberg & Kivalanka, 2018). In particular, LGBTQIA+ youth are cited as being early adopters of online technology, but they are also more likely to use these tools (GLSEN, 2013) with one study suggesting they are 13% more likely to be involved with online social networks (Stolzenberg & Hughes, 2017). They are also more likely than their non-LGBTQIA+ peers to have "close" online friends (50% compared to 19%, respectively; GLSEN, 2013). Trans* youth in particular had the highest rates of talking online with people who had similar identities to them (GLSEN, 2013). The Trevor Project (2021) found that transgender and nonbinary youth are more than twice as likely to find gender affirmation online than at home.

³² **My experience:** Dozens of students a year tell me that they use *ratemyprofessors.com* to help them research which faculty members they should or should not take classes with.

³³ **Participant:** "[At] a conference [we were given] a big booklet of just different definitions. And I kind of was skimming through, weeding through it, reading what they meant. . . . Nonconforming as well as nonbinary really clicked with me. Like, 'This is how I feel'" (Schutte, 2022, p. 171).

³⁴ **Informal research:** "President Trump has taken the first formal step toward withdrawing the U.S. from the World Health Organization, a move that comes as countries around the globe continue to grapple with the coronavirus pandemic that has claimed the lives of more than 540,000 people worldwide. A senior administration official told CBS News that the administration has submitted a notice of withdrawal, which will be effective July 6, 2021, to the United Nations secretary-general, who is the depositary for the WHO" (Quinn, 2020, paras. 1–2).

Breathe The group therapy facilitator said to take a few deep breaths when I get tense. It's definitely not as effective as vodka, I will say that. But it's a lot better for my liver. LOL. Anyway, I should focus on something positive. Let's see . . .

Drum roll, please . . . I came out at school today! Honestly, I wasn't planning on it because I can totally pass right now (although that may not always be true if I decide to go on hormones), but I logged into my class—which is now fully online which totally sucks and is a complete shitshow, but that's another story—and apparently you can change your name or whatever in Zoom because my professor put their name and then (she/her) after it.³⁵ I missed the entire beginning of class just staring at it. And then I googled how to change your name on Zoom³⁶ and then I just did it. I just added my pronouns.³⁷

It felt really weird because there was no crying (like my mom) and no asking of a million questions (like my dad) and no one making it all about them (like my sister). It was just there. And nobody said anything. But it looked so right next to my name. I know this is silly, but I took a screenshot of it. It was a really big moment for me³⁸ and I want to remember it even if no one else really noticed.

This really has been an insane semester. I was just finally feeling comfortable again, feeling good being sober, and then the entire world shut down and everybody is just home watching *Tiger King*³⁹ and drinking.⁴⁰ And I came out publicly for the first time. So, I think I win. Smiley face.

Spring Semester 2022

May 3, 2022

Life has been a bit of a roller coaster lately. COVID is still a thing although a lot of people seem to not believe it. Luckily, I live in a state that is mostly vaccinated, but it is still crazy to think how many people haven't altered their behavior at all. I'm finally back on

³⁵ **My experience:** “Online mediums such as Zoom allow individuals to provide pronouns if they choose to do so. This allows trans*-spectrum folx to share their pronouns publicly only when they are ready. It also provides faculty allies with a low-stakes and simple way to let students know that they are in a safe and inclusive space” (Schutte, 2022, p. 223).

³⁶ **Informal research:** Adding pronouns to one's name became so common that Zoom added a separate pronoun feature in their updated version. Their website states that:

[p]ronouns are an essential piece to many of our diverse users expressing themselves and respectfully referring to others. While this can be particularly important to LGBTQ community members, we also recognize that pronoun sharing enables our users to better share about themselves and be more respectfully treated on our platform. (Zoom Help Center, 2021, para. 1)

³⁷ **Participant:** “I talked to a few friends [and family] first [when I was coming out as transgender]. But other than that, I just posted to social media, pretty directly like, ‘I’m a transgender woman, my pronouns are ‘she’ and ‘her’ and that’s how most people found out” (Schutte, 2022, p. 121).

³⁸ **Academic research:** Coming out is a significant step for those identifying as transgender and/or gender nonconforming. Merging information gleaned from several models of transgender development (e.g., Bilodeau, 2005; Devor, 2004; Rankin & Beemyn, 2012), one can construct a model including the following general phases: an early awareness of being “different,” denying reality, the learning process, coming out, and finding a community.

³⁹ **Informal research:** “Just as governments around the world told people that they would need to stay at home to prevent the spread of COVID-19, *Tiger King* hit Netflix” (Coulson, 2020, para. 2).

⁴⁰ **Informal research:** “During the seven weeks between 1 March and 18 April 2020, there were large increases in alcohol sales in the U.S. Data from the week ending 21 March indicated that alcohol sales for off-premise locations (e.g., liquor stores) had increased by 54% and online alcohol sales had increased by 262% compared to sales data from the same week in 2019” (Grossman et al., 2020, para 4).

campus in-person, but everyone is still required to wear masks. I love it, actually. It lets me feel kind of anonymous and play with my gender expression on campus a little bit. I'm still not perfectly comfortable fully expressing myself all the time, but I'm taking a humanities class and the professor is very clearly LGBTQIA+-friendly. Besides the stuff they say in class and introducing themselves with their pronouns, I also did research online and found an article they wrote on supporting all student identities in the classroom. It's so nice to just be myself and know that the person at the front of the room has my back if someone says something ignorant.⁴¹

I actually didn't take any classes last semester because I was getting *a ton* of hours at work.⁴² It's weird because in spring 2021, I couldn't find any work at all.⁴³ I ended up taking three classes, which, honestly, was a huge mistake. The school was offering some face-to-face classes, but I thought it would be safer to be online. Well, it was safer, I guess, but online classes are *hard!*⁴⁴ Like, I don't know if other people feel this way, but I had a really difficult time being engaged at all. And then sharing wifi or bandwidth or whatever with my parents and my sister, all trying to be on our laptops and iPads all at the same time?⁴⁵ Yeah. Not exactly ideal. Long story short, I failed one of my three classes. In fall 2020, I only took one class and that was online and I did fine, so maybe I was just overwhelmed by how much work three classes is. Or maybe I was too busy researching stuff about gender identity and my state's laws about gender markers and all that.⁴⁶

On the plus side, I found a really awesome job at a vegan restaurant near my house and I'm working a lot and making tons of money. In fact, I didn't even take classes in the fall because I was so busy. My parents were pissed about that, saying that I wouldn't go back, blah blah blah.⁴⁷ But it was crazy how busy we were. I get why people got takeout at the beginning of the pandemic, but it seems like even though restaurants are open again, a lot of people still prefer take out. I'm actually doing both at the restaurant: I'm a server some days and a delivery driver other days. And what's really cool is that no one looks at me weird when my gender

⁴¹ **Participant:** "The teacher is the biggest factor in terms of me being comfortable sharing. If a professor is affirming, then at least I know that there's a decent chance that if someone's a fucking asshole in the middle of class, they'll do something about it" (Schutte, 2022, p. 206).

⁴² **Informal research:** "Wages jumped in the three months ending in September [2021] by the most on records dating back 20 years, a stark illustration of the growing ability of workers to demand higher pay from companies that are desperate to fill a near-record number of available jobs. . . . Lower-paid workers have seen the biggest gains, with pay rising for employees at restaurants, bars, and hotels by 8.1% in the third quarter from a year earlier" (*USA Today*, 2021, para. 1, 13).

⁴³ **Informal research:** "The coronavirus pandemic has ravaged the hospitality, travel and retail industries since its outset in March, when shutdowns and restrictions meant to contain the virus cost more than 520,000 U.S. service workers their jobs. This workforce is under renewed pressure amid a resurgence in coronavirus cases. . . . Restaurant and bar workers made up the bulk of those losses, roughly 3 in 4" (Bhattarai & Reiley, 2021, paras. 4–5).

⁴⁴ **Academic research:** "[S]tudents in face-to-face courses perform better than their online counterparts with respect to their grades, the propensity to withdraw from the course, and the likelihood of receiving a passing grade" (Altindag et al., 2021, p. 25).

⁴⁵ **My experience:** During spring 2020, when my in-person class was forced online due to COVID, several of my students expressed issues with their internet connection since their entire family was at home using the Wi-Fi at the same time.

Academic research: "[L]iving in a neighborhood with better broadband technology is associated with a larger increase in grades among students who had to switch from in-person to online instruction during COVID-19" (Altindag et al., 2021, p. 9).

⁴⁶ **Informal research:** see Transgender Guide's (n.d.) website for a list of gender marker information organized by state.

⁴⁷ **Academic research:** According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2021), six years after enrolling, students who attended a two-year school are more likely to not have a degree and not be enrolled (44.6%) than to have earned a degree (41.5%). The rates of no degree/not enrolled are even higher for those who are first-generation and for those who delayed going to college after high school (NCES, 2021).

expression is outside the binary. Like, I wore a dress shirt with a bow tie and a skirt the other day and got *so* many compliments! It felt so nice. I mean, the owner has half a shaved head and half dyed bright orange hair, so I guess I shouldn't be surprised that the clientele would be cool with someone who doesn't present as cis, but it still feels amazing to just be me, in public, and not only *not* have to worry, but to also be celebrated.

Speaking of being celebrated . . . something incredibly cool happened at school today. At the end of this semester, I'll be only 15 credits away from graduating, so I'm finally getting to take fun classes in my major and actually being interested in what I'm learning. So, I was presenting my final project in class today, and I worked really hard on it and had all this really interesting research that I worked with a librarian to find. And when I was done, my classmates seemed really impressed and asked me all sorts of questions about my topic. But the coolest thing was that afterward my professor referred to me as a "scholar."⁴⁸ My parents didn't even go to college, but I'm a "scholar." How freakin' cool is that? I'm really proud of myself.

Spring Semester 2023

June 4, 2023

Well, it took six years,⁴⁹ but I'm finally graduating tomorrow! Insert scream here. I've got my gown ready and everything. My parents are so freakin' proud of me.

I know community college is supposed to only take two years but does anyone actually finish it that quick?⁵⁰ The past two semesters have been utterly insane for me. I took three classes in fall and I'm taking four this semester. I just couldn't drag it out any longer. Obviously, I can't work and take that many classes, I'd go nuts, so I haven't worked since last summer. Thank goodness I'm good with money and saving and all that.

Besides, I actually got a job in my field! I kind of can't believe it. I'm actually going to be able to afford to move out of my parents' house and live in the city and in a neighborhood where people don't stare at my gender presentation. Our neighbors have gotten . . . well, tolerant, I guess. No one actually says anything overt, but I still see the looks. Maybe people will always look at me a little weird. But honestly, I kind of don't care anymore. I finally figured out who I am (25 years old seems like a good age for that, right?)⁵¹ and I'm happy that my outward self is finally starting to look like how I feel inside.

Besides, I went to the interview for my new job presenting myself the way I want to look: hair, clothes, shoes, all of it. I was 100% myself. Well, I was definitely more professional than I am in everyday life, but other than that I felt fully authentic. I just walked in, told them my name, told them my pronouns, and sat down. It felt awesome.

⁴⁸ **Academic research:** "[A]uthentic liberatory education must include a collaborative approach so that both student and teacher may learn and grow simultaneously" (Case et al., 2012, p. 149). Collaborative methodologies "may foreground an ethic of care and compassion" (Jourian & Nicolazzo, 2016, p. 5).

⁴⁹ **Academic research:** Most community college graduates take at least five or six years to graduate (Shapiro et al., 2016).

⁵⁰ **Academic research:** According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 14.7% of Associate Degree earners did so in two years; 20.5% in three years; 15.4% in 4 years; 18.4% in 5-6 years; and 31.1% took more than six years (Shapiro et al., 2016).

⁵¹ **Academic research:** In 2000, Jeffrey Arnett proposed a new phase of development. He argued that "emerging adulthood" is "neither adolescence nor young adulthood" and a time when "the scope of independent exploration of life's possibilities is greater for most people than it will be at any other period of the life course" (Arnett, 2000, p. 469). This freedom is exciting, but also anxiety-inducing "because the lives of young people are so unsettled and many of them have no idea where their explorations will lead" (Arnett, 2015, p. 1). Many of them will try college albeit in a different way than has been traditional. According to Arnett (2000), for this group, "college education is often pursued in a non-linear way, frequently combined with work, and punctuated by periods of nonattendance" (p. 471).

I guess I should have known they'd be cool because my professor set it up for me. They are absolutely my favorite professor. Ever since I told them how great it felt when they called me a "scholar" last year, they always call me "Scholar" instead of my name. I know it's silly, but it makes me feel so great. I mean, just six short years ago I was scared to death of going to college, worried about what bathroom I was going to use, worried about not making friends, worried about not being smart enough. I didn't even know my own gender. And now I'm comfortable with my gender identity *and* my gender expression, I've earned a college degree, and I'm starting a job in a career that I love and am excited about progressing in.

I might even go back to school. My new company has a program where they pay for your bachelor's degree as long as you maintain a certain GPA.⁵² The idea of working and going to school at the same time again worries me a bit because I've gotten used to just being a student these past few semesters, but I guess I can worry about that later. Right now, I need to focus on graduating tomorrow! Woohoo! But seriously: what are these gowns made of? The tag literally says to keep away from flames.⁵³ And the mortar board thingy? Who looks good in that? I can tell you: literally no one. I guess I should stop fussing about that stuff and get to bed. I have a big day tomorrow.

Is it horrible to say that I'm really proud of myself? 'Cause I really, really am. Just a few years ago I was so unhappy and so unhealthy and now I'm here. Exactly where I want to be. And exactly *who* I want to be.

Conclusion: My Part of the Story

I have not lived Zyx's life. In almost all identity categories, I come from a position of power and privilege: I am a White, heterosexual, cisgender, able-bodied, middle class, English-as-a-first-language, neurotypical, educated professor. However, because I was born female, I am subjected to societal expectations rooted in my assumed gender and little else including the expectation to have children, serve others, and be meek and deferential. Despite this, I have it incredibly easy compared to those identifying as trans*-spectrum. After reading Julia Serano's (2013) "Trans Woman Manifesto," I understood for the first time how the oppression of those identifying as trans* is inextricable from my (admittedly lesser) gender subjugation. The hyperfeminization, hypersexualization, and body objectification Serano (2013) discusses are not trans*-specific; "all" women are expected to be "feminine" (a moving target) at all times; we are treated as overly sexual when showing even the slightest interest in sex outside "acceptable" realms (i.e., within a heterosexual, Christian, childbearing marriage), and our bodies are constantly objectified in popular culture (but we are vilified if we use those bodies as commodities to gain money or access). As such, I have adopted a social justice-oriented feminism, one that seeks to create a society "outside the bounds of patriarchy" (Parry & Johnson, 2016, p. 28), one that embraces all gender identities, and one that rejects the hegemonic binary notion of gender.

Promoting equality regardless of identity is the lens through which I live my life. As a human being, I believe in the interconnectedness of all living things. For me, this means a daily commitment to making the world a better place, even in seemingly small ways. I believe there are no trivial gestures of kindness. Everything done to make someone else's life better is

⁵² **Informal research:** "An increasing number of employers . . . have launched new and upgraded tuition assistance programs. Some of these employers hope to help their workforce get back to school after many students were forced to pause their education amid the COVID-19 pandemic. But that's not the only incentive for these employers to offer tuition reimbursement benefits. Companies will often offer tuition assistance to attract and retain employees or to develop the skill set of their current workforce. Additionally, tuition reimbursement of up to \$5,250 per employee is tax deductible for employers" (Bryant, 2022, paras. 2–3).

⁵³ **My experience:** okay, they may not be "literally" flammable, but the material does not feel organic.

important and meaningful. As an English professor, I believe in the potency of a good tale. For me, this means acknowledging the power in the smallest details. I believe there are no boring narratives. Every person has a compelling and beautiful story to tell. While Zyx's experience is not mine nor possibly the reader's, it can hopefully help us see a well-formed argument within a good story . . . as well as the power in both.

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