


Confronting Propaganda: Performative Pedagogy as Transgender Resistance

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 0009-0007-1974-7875

ABSTRACT: Education is facing a critical threat as those in positions of authority utilize propaganda to advance and promote an exclusionary worldview that serves their own interests. This essay focuses on one such misinformation campaign, which seeks to limit the rights of transgender individuals, including their very existence—a cause championed by right-wing politicians. The paper investigates how the American educational system fuels discrimination towards marginalized bodies, particularly transgender people, and suggests performative pedagogy as a strategy to counteract this oppression. The essay begins by examining how the concept of performative pedagogy is used in contemporary drag shows and how deeply ingrained the idea of white supremacy is in transgender oppression. Through case studies, the paper shows how performative pedagogy serves as a powerful counter to the fundamental ideology of hatred. It explains how, through performative pedagogy, marginalized voices can be strengthened and serve as an effective communication tool for influencing society’s future by expressing what cannot be spoken through actions. This study argues that equipping today’s children with performative pedagogy enables them to withstand the challenges that they may face and helps them become more resilient in the face of difficulties. It draws attention to the fundamental responsibility of educators to teach for the benefit of society and to provide students with the skills necessary to face and overcome the challenges that will be used against them. Through the embracement of performative pedagogy, contemporary society can raise and foster a generation that actively opposes the oppressive forces that are reinforced and perpetuated by those in power.

KEYWORDS: exclusionary worldview, performative pedagogy, critical thought, transgender rights, intersectionality

Alisa Faingersh is the recipient of CJAM’s inaugural *bell hooks Intersectional Scholarship Award*, an award given to an individual who, through their published manuscript, embodies the profound commitment to intersectional scholarship, social justice advocacy, and transformative education that championed by the esteemed author, scholar, and activist, bell hooks.



<https://doi.org/10.25071/2817-5344/57>

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Received 16 May 2023; Received in revised form 4 July 2023; Accepted 07 July 2023

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Education is at stake. The following essay explains that the American right wing prefers the enforcement of an education that echoes propaganda promoting an exclusionary worldview, inherently beneficial to their motivations. Wielding education as a tool to construct narratives promoting closed-mindedness and compliance, those in power mock its unique ability to effectively challenge systemic and societal oppression. Luckily, it is shown through deliberation and case studies that the onset of the attack on education and critical thought by the right wing can be mitigated using performative pedagogical techniques, both inside the classroom and out. One of these propagandas is the campaign for limiting the rights of transgender individuals, namely, their right to exist, which has become a popular crusade for right-wing politicians. This essay examines how the persecution of certain bodies, such as those of transgender individuals, is particularly nurtured by the forces at work in the education facilitated by individual and independent American states and how it can best be combatted by the methodology performative educators propose and utilize. Beginning with a preliminary exploration of the meaning of performative pedagogy and how it manifests in today's persecuted drag shows, the essay will move on to define transgender oppression as rooted in white supremacy and go on to explain, with case studies, how performative pedagogy is a firm rebuttal for this foundational ideology of hate.

The lasting impact on individuals cannot be denied, whether through the manifestation of performative pedagogy like Drag Story Hour or when Tucker Carlson distorts it in his theatrical dissemination of propagandized lies. Performative pedagogy, whether manifested as drag lunches or story times, is a tool that is uniquely suited to creating more transgender (and otherwise marginalized) inclusive educational spaces by challenging and disrupting systems of oppression. By centring embodied, creative, and participatory practices in academic settings, performative pedagogy can foster more profound, more meaningful learning experiences that resonate with learners on multiple levels, including emotional, cognitive, and experiential. Today's learners are forced to wade through an education that has become thickly saturated with neo-liberalist ideas, which, at its core, is designed to shape compliant

and docile workers who themselves value stability over progression. By physically asking them to move through these problems, performative pedagogy discourages the degree of separation between the students and the issues they are exploring and fortifies their empathy for others instead of allowing "... the needs of the economy to dictate the principal aims of school... [and] suppress[ing] the teaching of oppositional and critical thought that would challenge the rule of capital."¹ John T. Warren, a communication professor at Southern Illinois University, describes in his journal the time when he was unexpectedly asked to supply for a civics class he had been observing for his research—a class usually facilitated in the predictable organization of a lecture followed by a discussion. He notes that "while [it] engag[ed] students in complex thought, asking them to think about their own implication in systems of racism critically, it did not provide any space for students to engage this material in any other way."² As a scholar of performative pedagogy, he predicted that this might be the tool necessary for the more profound challenge these students needed, one of its key features being its focus on embodied practices, such as role-playing, improvisation, and physical movement. Warren implemented precisely this. He writes that he "... wanted them to perform, to move these concepts and ideas into their flesh... To see themselves meant risking privilege."³ In this way, drag performances, specially catered to children, can be interpreted as a type of performative pedagogy which acts with a secondary purpose of entertainment while primarily delivering transgender narratives to its audiences. Hence, drag performance engages learners in critical reflection and inspires dialogue about issues of gender, identity, and oppression—especially in communities lacking queer representation whose existence inherently challenges queer oppression. By centring transgender voices and creating inclusive learning spaces, drag acts can challenge cis-normative assumptions and foster greater empathy for and understanding of the experiences of transgender individuals. Incorporating transgender narratives and perspectives into curricula and involving transgender individuals as co-creators of knowledge, performative pedagogy is a direct protest against the weaponization of education by right-wing politicians who continue to try to define it

as “an animating space of violence, revenge, resentment, and victimhood as a privileged form of white Christian identity.”⁴ This context is self-evident as far-right legislators loudly rely on culture war topics to rally their voter base and gain traction for their campaigns by enacting legislation opposing critical race theory and queer existence. Performative pedagogy and transgender activism share a common goal: to challenge oppressive structures and create more equitable, just societies. Performative pedagogy can be used as a tool for activism, and transgender activism can inform and shape the practice of the latter.

It is essential to recognize that this hate perpetuated by the right-wing is rooted in upholding a white supremacist worldview, one which transgender activism inherently opposes. White nationalist movements are not considered revolutionary in this essay, despite being insurgent and agitational in essence—it is the act of rebellion against bigotry that earns transgender existence its ‘revolutionary’ epithet. Oppositely, gender nonconformity and otherwise radical forms of existence are fundamentally revolutionary in their nature, challenging with their very presence a paradigm that is obsessed with enforcing roles dictated by physical characteristics as anything other than a social construction. Importantly, these roles are delegated by those in power, based on those in power, or more explicitly, based on characteristics like skin colour, nose size, or how well one performs the gender that is societally expected of them. The very worldview that allows fascists to believe that there is no room for the existence of transgender individuals in our world is the same worldview that is governed by values superficially assigned to characteristics resembling those of the wealthy and powerful (i.e., whoever society deems white in any particular historical moment). The mass and widely celebrated book burning of May 10, 1933, by the Nazis becomes present in one’s mind when reflecting on such motivations as the “... determined effort to destroy any knowledge that might undermine [a] white supremacist ideology” observed in today’s America.⁵ Having burned nearly all of Magnus Hirschfeld’s library, a Jewish sexologist and facilitator of the first clinic in the world to provide gender-affirming surgeries, the German public demonstrated the power of Nazi propaganda to educate into hate. Today’s sudden

choreographed crusade for the loathing of transgender individuals is not a new idea, for they have always been the low-hanging fruit for forces of power to direct the public's real frustrations towards. Difference is inseparably a symbol of challenge to the status quo, which works to extinguish it, and so one can draw a logical throughline as to why a population frustrated with the machinations of neo-liberalism is so susceptible to accepting a particular loathing of transgender identity. In a system that allows for slight chances for upper mobility through conformity, docility is valued above all else. The radicality and nonconformity of the existence of transgender individuals does not fit into the white supremacist worldview, and the masses become vulnerable to propaganda education which convinces them that transgender existence threatens their personal efforts at conformity. In their attempt to conserve their position of power and maintain stability in the way of discouraging critical thought and challenging education, the right-wing works to villainize transgender individuals. Through the same logical framework that upheld white supremacy in WWII Germany (and covertly continues to uphold it in modern-day America), the propaganda machine diverts attention away from the genuine material struggles Americans observe around them and redirects their anger at the lack of a promised meritocracy towards a scapegoat like transgender individuals.

The well-suitedness of performative pedagogy for the exploration of transgender identity directly speaks to its usefulness in combatting the white supremacist propaganda education on the rise in today's America. Embodied practices can be particularly effective in challenging transphobic and racist attitudes and behaviours by allowing learners to explore, experiment, and create new knowledge collaboratively. For example, in a transgender-affirming performative pedagogy classroom, students might engage in role-playing exercises that explore the experiences of transgender individuals or use physical movement to embody the experiences of gender dysphoria. It is understandably difficult to put into words the discomfort of an existence in a body which does not reflect how one sees the manifestation of their identity. With each attempt to convey this crucial and complex concept, the risk of accumulating translation errors looms, gradually eroding the resonance and impact of its

message. Performance avoids the need for the reformatting of this experience and eliminates the creation of additional barriers to understanding. Through these practices, learners can gain a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by transgender individuals and develop empathy and compassion for those whose experiences may be different from their own. In addition to embodied practices, performative pedagogy also emphasizes the importance of dialogue and collaboration in the co-creation of knowledge. This approach can be particularly powerful in challenging transphobic attitudes and behaviours by fostering a sense of community and shared purpose among learners. In a performative pedagogy classroom focused on transgender oppression, students might engage in group discussions, debates, and collaborative writing exercises that explore the root causes of transphobia and identify strategies for disrupting and dismantling these systems of oppression. Through these practices, learners can develop critical thinking skills and gain a deeper understanding of the complex ways in which transphobia intersects with other forms of oppression, such as racism, misogyny, and ableism. Elyse Lamm Pineau explains that “performance studies scholars and practitioners locate themselves as embodied researchers: listening, observing, reflecting, theorizing, interpreting, and representing human communication through the medium of their own and other’s experiencing their bodies.”⁶ The use of the body as a performance venue brings both teachers’ and students’ origins, differences, and commonalities to light. The transgender body is at the center of what right-wing politicians call a ‘debate’ on the uncertainty of its deserved existence, making performative pedagogy the perfect ironic rebuttal. Florida Governor Ron DeSantis wages war on critical education “and always with a whiff of high-drama political theatre, which makes clear that the discourses of racial hatred and white nationalism contain valuable political currency.”⁷ By pointing out that as much as these politicians insist on dramatizing politics for the entertainment and distraction of the public, an alarming lack of transgender individuals are ever given a spotlight on their stage to speak with their voices. In fact, right-wing politicians actively snuff out such attempts at true performative pedagogy, as is regularly seen in their support for the protest of Drag Queen Story Hour. Conceived

in 2015 in San Francisco, the goal of these book readings is not only to foster the love of reading in young children but also to use the opportunity to do so performatively and for the added bonus benefit of teaching kids “diversity, self-acceptance, and to look beyond gender stereotypes... [capturing] the imagination and play of the gender fluidity of childhood [it] gives kids glamorous, positive, and unabashedly queer role models.”⁸ Kevin Wong, an advocate for the Trevor Project organization, explains plainly that “any positive visibility helps people of all sexual orientations and gender identities, even if they’re straight or cisgender, to learn more about other folks,” truly underscoring the effectivity of performative pedagogy as a tool in answering the persistent forces of the right-wing.⁹ Elizabeth LaFleur echoes the significance of this article in her 2019 editorial, where she details the feedback loop that uncritical propaganda education facilitates—media reporting on the escalating nature of protests outside of a Greenville library hosting a Drag Queen Story Hour and the armed SWAT team monitoring the anticipated protestor conflicts in its vicinity.¹⁰ This documentation of the response to previous reports of armed and agitated anti-LGBTQ protesters only cemented itself in these right-wing communities as further proof that the state is in collusion with the drag queen and otherwise all other queer people and that these concerned Christian mothers were, in fact, the truly oppressed minority. Conflicts similar to the one LaFleur reports on continue to escalate thanks to their prominence in the talking points of right-wing politicians who use them to garner an angrily misled voter base. Ultimately, legislation is proposed, and laws are passed which serve to limit the ability of transgender individuals to exist freely, and it is the inclusion of the context of this law-passing as part of the social spectacle that makes right-wing propaganda a performative pedagogy of sorts. Where it falls short of being a true representation of performative pedagogy at work is in its lack of challenging and, in fact, maintenance of the status quo through the discouragement of presenting multiple perspectives and amplifying the voices of marginalized bodies. Unfortunately, it does borrow from performative pedagogy its effectiveness in rallying and garnering self-dubbed patriotic citizens that enact what they believe to be righteous violence. The Proud Boys are a North American

terrorist organization made up of far-right men, increasingly attractive to Latino and otherwise non-white members, who self-identify as neo-fascist and promote and engage in political silencing violence. Underscoring the organization's role in the escalation of violence outside a Drag Queen Story Hour in New York, Matt Laviertes remarks that "drag, once an underground art form... has become a political flashpoint in recent months," in part thanks to the Proud Boys, who operate as auxiliary arms of the right-wing propaganda education machine.¹¹ Included in this are several other actors, such as Moms for Liberty, a relatively new organization that has emerged as a vocal opponent of critical race theory and other progressive education, including performative pedagogy in the way of opposing the inclusion of books which give voice to marginalized identities.¹² The Patriot Front, another such group, is a neo-fascist organization that advocates for the creation of a white ethnostate in the United States, explicitly and overtly advertising the white supremacist ideology inherent to the foundation of the beliefs of all of these groups, although some may be more reluctant to admit it for strategic mainstream traction. Both Moms for Liberty and the Patriot Front have taken positions opposed to advancing transgender rights. Moms for Liberty has been vocal in opposing gender identity education and outspoken against the ability of transgender students to participate in the school sports team according to their gender identity. Although the Patriot Front focuses mainly on racial issues, the suppression of LGBTQ+ rights cannot be separated from their agenda, as transgender rights, as aforementioned, represent a threat to their vision of a world where traditional gender roles and the social and racial hierarchies they are adjacent to prevail. All these fraternities of convenience can be seen as pieces of a fabric whose sprawl is intentionally being nurtured by the right-wing political parties and politicians—the final tapestry engulfing as many susceptible minds as it can in its own efforts to educate through propaganda that capitalizes off of the intersection of hysteria and ignorance. Lavin illustrates this sentiment in the following lengthy quotation:

“What the far right proclaims through explicit street violence it wants to reinforce with the implicit violence of the state. Bills that seek to suppress anti-racist education, anti-trans legislation that seeks to codify antiquated gender roles, and the severe and continual restriction of abortion rights in states with right-wing legislatures typify the ways hatred of gender nonconformity, a desire to control women’s bodies, and racism intermingle.”¹³

A relevant example to this last point is the Koreatown spa attack by anti-transgender rights protesters in LA in the summer of 2021, where mass hysteria over a suspected and rumoured transgender woman client frequenting the spa was enough to not only draw a mob of people brandished with weapons, but also to incite actual violence. Notably, the five injured individuals, two by a deadly weapon,¹⁴ might be disappointed to find out that while their claim that “a trans woman used a changing room that she was fully allowed to use” has flimsy reasonable standing to begin with, “no trans women actually happened to be using it” that day—it was all a hoax.¹⁵ The *Slate* journalist observes that this “... underscores how thin a pretext is needed to prompt these sorts of outbursts from the far right.”¹⁶ The danger must be noted that a common hate campaign toward the rights of transgender individuals centralizes this collective effort of the right wing. This choreographed execution of propaganda education serves the purpose of slowly and carefully shifting the Overton window further and further right until the unthinkable becomes politically fathomable. Henry Giroux summarizes this sentiment in the following lengthy quotation:

“Republicans, in the years of the post-Trump presidency, who are perfecting the dark art of silencing Americans.... it has sadly become the Republican norm to stifle debate. Don’t say gay, don’t say gun control, don’t say racism, don’t let kids read the “wrong” books or be read to by the “wrong”

people, don't permit children to learn about their bodies or their rights."¹⁷

Its peaks coincide with the increases in progression made by transgender rights activists, most visible when they are celebrated and performed. It follows, then, that in the presence of any performative pedagogy, particularly on the subject of transgender rights and the oppression of those rights, the company of this oppressive pedagogy of silencing follows. The emergence of books with gay and transgender characters is met with DeSantis's 'Don't Say Gay Bill,' "... forcing teachers to be silent about sexual orientation and gender identity issues while using his office to baselessly target and label people who oppose this bill as pedophiles."¹⁸ Transgender narratives in the form of performative pedagogy are needed education curated by the oppressed for everyone and must be enacted to counter this recurring cycle. By performing and continuing to read books like *All Are Welcome* and *Black Is a Rainbow Color* to children and parents present at these Drag Queen Story Hours despite the persistence of the cyber, actualized, verbal, and physical harassment, queer individuals demonstrate their existence and their right to do so. By physically showing up and being present, not to mention doing so in a high art form such as drag, queer individuals carve a space out for themselves on the stage that right-wing politicians insist on playing out their political scandals. Performative pedagogy is so especially fit as a tool in the fight for the rights of transgender individuals because it makes use of their very bodies, which they are so persecuted for and suffer so greatly because of, to execute education (the most effective form of activism).

This essay aims to demonstrate that American propaganda education that fosters hate, especially with a hyper fixation on a gender non-conforming 'other,' can effectively be countered with transgender narratives in performative pedagogy. By continuing to advocate for the above-outlined benefits of performative pedagogy, more and more individuals will wake up to the contradiction being hidden from them. The façade of freedom and liberty dissipates with even the beginning of critical thought on the subject of DeSantis's true motivations. One begins to understand how he "... and his allies

uphold the kind of indoctrination he claims to oppose” banning and burning books “...because they wrote and taught ideas he saw as a political threat.”¹⁹ Performative pedagogy combats the stifling of voice through its power of expressing what can no longer be spoken: through action. Performative pedagogy is the most effective method to communicate this to the future of our society, to our children, who it is our responsibility to educate for the good and, importantly, to be prepared to withstand the bad that will be weaponized to target them.

Notes

¹ Mike Lecturer in Education University Of Cole and Dave College Hill, *Schooling and Equality: Fact, Concept and Policy* (Routledge, 2013).

² John T. Warren, "Performative Pedagogy, At-Risk Students, and the Basic Course: Fourteen Moments in Search of Possibility," eCommons, n.d., <http://ecommons.udayton.edu/bcca/vol15/iss1/8>.

³ John T. Warren, "Performative Pedagogy, At-Risk Students, and the Basic Course: Fourteen Moments in Search of Possibility," eCommons, n.d., <http://ecommons.udayton.edu/bcca/vol15/iss1/8>.

⁴ Henry Giroux, "Fascist Politics in the Age of Neoliberal Capitalism: Confronting the Domestication of the Unimaginable - CounterPunch.Org," CounterPunch.org, April 11, 2023, <https://www.counterpunch.org/2023/04/11/fascist-politics-in-the-age-of-neoliberal-capitalismconfronting-the-domestication-of-the-unimaginable/>.

⁵ Talia Lavin, "Why Transphobia Is at the Heart of the White Power Movement | The Nation," The Nation, August 22, 2021, <https://www.thenation.com/article/society/transphobia-white-supremacy/>.

⁶ Elyse Lamm Pineau, "Teaching Is Performance: Reconceptualizing a Problematic Metaphor," *American Educational Research Journal* 31, no. 1 (March 20, 1994): 3–25, <https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312031001003>.

⁷ Henry A. Giroux, "US Fascism Is Spreading Under the Guise of 'Patriotic Education,'" *Truthout*, April 13, 2023, <https://truthout.org/articles/us-fascism-is-spreading-under-the-guise-of-patriotic-education/>.

⁸ Tess Owen, "The Far Right Is Doxxing and Threatening Drag Queen Story Hour. These Queens Won't Be Stopped.," *VICE News*, June 27, 2019, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/evy7e4/the-far-right-is-doxxing-and-threatening-drag-queen-story-hour-these-queens-wont-be-stopped>.

⁹ Kelly Weill, "Far-Right Extremists Target 'Drag Queen Story Hour,'" *The Daily Beast*, June 27, 2019, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/far-right-extremists-target-drag-queen-story-hour>.

¹⁰ Elizabeth LaFleur, The Greenville News, "Drag Queen Story Hour: Threats Compel Deputies to Make Security Plan for Greenville Event," *The Greenville News*, February 14, 2019, <https://www.greenvilleonline.com/story/news/2019/02/14/drag-queen-story-hour-greenville-county-sheriffs-office-security-plan/2871354002/>.

¹¹ Matt Lavietes, "West Texas A&M Students Protest Drag Show Cancellation," March 22, 2023, <https://www.nbcnews.com/nbc-out/out-news/texas-university-president-cancels-drag-show-comparing-art-form-blackf-rcna76089>.

¹² Khaleda Rahman, "Moms for Liberty Banned Book List—The Novels They Want Taken Out of Schools," *Newsweek*, November 3, 2022, <https://www.newsweek.com/moms-liberty-banned-book-list-schools-1756574>.

¹³ Talia Lavin, "Why Transphobia Is at the Heart of the White Power Movement | The Nation," The Nation, August 22, 2021, <https://www.thenation.com/article/society/transphobia-white-supremacy/>.

¹⁴ Jennifer McGraw, "Violence Breaks out over Trans Rights at Koreatown Spa," KTLA, July 3, 2021, <https://ktla.com/news/violence-breaks-out-at-trans-rights-protest-at-koreatown-spa/>.

¹⁵ Evan Urquhart, "Violence Over an Alleged Transphobic Hoax Shows the Danger of Underestimating Anti-Trans Hate," *Slate Magazine*, July 9, 2021, <https://slate.com/human-interest/2021/07/wi-spa-la-transphobic-protest.html>.

¹⁶ Evan Urquhart, "Violence Over an Alleged Transphobic Hoax Shows the Danger of Underestimating Anti-Trans Hate," *Slate Magazine*, July 9, 2021, <https://slate.com/human-interest/2021/07/wi-spa-la-transphobic-protest.html>.

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¹⁸ Barbara Ransby, "Ron DeSantis's Attack on Black Studies Is Textbook Proto-Fascism," *Truthout*, February 7, 2023, <https://truthout.org/articles/ron-desantiss-attack-on-black-studies-is-textbook-proto-fascism/>.

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Henry A. Giroux currently holds the McMaster University Chair for Scholarship in the Public Interest in the English and Cultural Studies Department and is the Paulo Freire Distinguished Scholar in Critical Pedagogy. His most recent books in Chris Walker, Spencer Beswick, Anthony Ballas, et al. “US Fascism Is Spreading under the Guise of ‘Patriotic Education.’” Truthout, April 13, 2023.
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