

## Book Review / Compte rendu

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*Fierce, Fabulous and Fluid: How Trans High School Students Work at Gender Nonconformity* by L.J. Slovin. New York University Press, 2024, 230 pages, hardcover. ISBN: 9781779400505

As my colleague Dr. Sabine Lebel often laments, “shit is dire.” This lamentation proves correct as we look at the world around us (see for example: increasing genocides, ecocides, and fascism), and it is also true in the context of Canadian schools. Disturbingly, trans and gender-nonconforming young people have been the focus of transphobic policy making in Canadian schools. In Alberta, policies emerging in 2024 include requiring parents to opt students into any lessons on sex education, sexual orientation, or gender identity, while also restricting youth under 17 from accessing gender-affirming healthcare (Bellefontaine, 2024). In Saskatchewan, students under 16 now need parental consent before teachers and schools can use their chosen names and pronouns (Quon & Warwick, 2023). In New Brunswick, former-Premier Blaine Higgs’ Conservative government has left a damaging legacy of queerphobic and gender-based violence, including the rollback of critical protections for 2SLGBTQIA+ students, such as weakening Policy 713, which had previously upheld the rights and safety of these students in the public school system (see also: Burkholder & Keehn, 2024). Structural problems abound, and yet gender-nonconforming young people like the youth featured in L.J. Slovin’s *Fierce, Fabulous and Fluid* resist categorization, fight back, act up, write “gaymances” (p. 1), withdraw, make memes, make their own spaces, and even find joy even in Canadian high

schools – even in schools in New Brunswick, Saskatchewan and Alberta!

Slovin’s *Fierce, Fabulous & Fluid* does not seek to understand how young people navigate the policies that restrict their identities, or the ways of doing and embodying gender, or how arbitrarily old they should be before their names and pronouns are recognized, but rather, those that seek to *support* trans and gender nonconforming youth. This distinction is why I think this book should be required reading for educators in Canada and beyond.

First, a note on terminology: Slovin acknowledges that the six young people in their ethnographic study of a BC school called “East City High,” used a variety of words to describe themselves: queer, trans, bi, gay, pan, gender-fluid, nonbinary, gender-nonconforming, and more. However, Slovin chooses to use the term “gender nonconformity” and “trans” in the book as “umbrella term[s] for any person whose gender does not align with the one they were designated at birth, to signal how the youth desired to be recognized as trans and, at times, held this desire for recognition in tension” (p. 2).

Slovin argues that schools position trans identities as inherently risky, through “the people, the physical environment, the curriculum, and the policies that reproduce [] narrow understandings of trans identities that [do] not have space for the capaciousness of [young people’s] relationships to gender” (p. 3). What

might it look like, instead, to make space for capaciousness, for instability, and not knowing? Slovin's book honours its participants by making space for exactly this: honouring young people's capaciousness and self-determination. Relatedly, 'Scarecrow Jones' is truly the greatest participant-chosen pseudonym this reviewer has ever encountered!

*Fierce, Fluid and Fabulous* is organized into seven chapters, with a bonus chapter, "What Grade Are You In?" which appears in the Appendix. Slovin begins by introducing the reader to the main arguments in the book, namely moving beyond viewing gender-nonconformity as inherently risky, noting the unequal gender and racialized labour of caring and care work, and perhaps my favourite theme: "gender is never just gender" (p. 18). Slovin also positions themselves in the study, including returning multiple times in the book to how they were read as a student by other adults in East City High.

Slovin begins Chapter One by unsettling and interrogating some of the "feel good" (p. 31), empty-ish diversity politics that animate East City High and so many other Canadian schools. Chapter 2 questions the dominant modes of "including" trans and gender-nonconforming young people in schools—accommodation approaches. Rather than focusing on the already established body of research that explains how schools are structurally awful for trans and gender-nonconforming youth, Slovin instead explores the ways that accommodations that are individual and "approached on a case-by-case basis...reproduce normative expectations for students and reproduce a certain type of student that is allowed to be included" (p. 77). Through examples from the young people themselves, Slovin emphasizes how ableist, racist, and fat-phobic these individualized approaches to accommodation are.

Chapter 3 investigates the labour that gender-nonconforming youth engage in at school. Slovin highlights the ways that the "language of concern" (p. 86) masks the harm that teachers, counselors, and administrators perpetuate, "often unconsciously, to displace their transphobia by imposing worry onto youth who were not actually in danger" (p. 87). Again, Slovin makes the case that these adults in schools position being trans and gender-nonconforming as inherently

bad, inherently risky, and wonders if instead, we might displace "concern" and look to youth like Vixen, who, "believed gender should not be boring, so they wanted to "keep it confusing." (p. 105).

Chapter 4 goes deeper into an exploration of the labour of gender-nonconformity, noting that these young people's identities were perceived as "less "real" and "valid" than transnormative ones." (p. 112). These perceptions affected the pronouns that young people used in school situations, and it also impacted the things that they wore. Importantly, Slovin argues that the six young people engaged in labour to "both [] become legible as trans by adhering to societal expectations of gender-nonconformity and to trust their own genders regardless of others' capacities to recognize them" (p. 134).

Chapter 5 explores the worlds that gender-nonconforming young people created for themselves in East City High through the metaphor of trapdoors — "liminal spaces that provide escape in part through their embrace of unknowability...they invite the possibility of hope" (p. 139). These spaces included the All Nations room, the tech booth, in their writing and imagination in notebooks and on their phones, and in the Band Hall (which "is for gay shit," p. 161).

In their conclusion, Slovin recommends that schools, educators, administrators, counselors, and all of us, resist the conceptualization of transness as risky, and move toward viewing gender-nonconformity as desirable. Since reading *Fierce, Fabulous and Fluid*, I keep thinking that I'd love for more teachers and researchers to have a chance to read this book and potentially reimagine their investment in trans=risk discourses and individualized approaches to "accommodating" gender-nonconforming students in school spaces. Instead, as Slovin asks us: What if we, as educators, positioned gender-nonconformity and queerness as desirable futures? What if we imagine understanding queer and trans and gender-nonconforming young people on their own terms, even as we/they fail to read these young people as queer and trans? What kinds of supports might we imagine alongside young people if we considered them as knowledgeable about themselves? How might we amplify and nurture the spaces they create for themselves within the

schools that we've got right now, even in New Brunswick, Saskatchewan, and Alberta? Leaving me with more exciting provocations than when I began the book, I think *Fierce, Fabulous & Fluid* should be required reading for educators, policymakers, and educational researchers in Canada and beyond.

## REFERENCES

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