

This statement of principles was written by Christopher Reed to alert colleagues, administrators, and students wanting to engage his expertise in sexuality and gender studies to be prepared for reasoned debate grounded in historical knowledge and open to critical thinking. His classes on sexuality and queer theory engage a diversity of approaches to these topics, including discursive theories of gender/sexuality, and therefore allow for a reasoned variety of protocols of pronoun address and citation.

He writes to address a campus climate -- not specific to Penn State, but national -- in which recent ideologies concerning sex and gender gain traction not through informed, reasoned analysis but by ignoring histories of other, possibly more productive, approaches, and the new litany of "correctness" is enforced by appeals to authority to suppress alternative ideas.

Reed asserts his right to engage these issues as a fundamental matter of academic freedom. As a scholar fortunate to be protected by academic rank and job security, he offers the following 25 axioms and observations (enumerated in homage to Eve Sedgwick's "Axiomatic" and Susan Sontag's "Notes on Camp") as a modest contribution to these debates. He hopes the tone might also have a hint of Oscar Wilde's "Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young." This text thus attempts to perform what it describes: the value of the unruly GLQ cultures once again at risk of pathologization and prohibition.

1. Chronology is not the same as progress. Over time, ideas can be refined and improved. They can also be co-opted and dumbed down. It is an unwarranted assumption that ideas about sexuality and gender today necessarily correct or supplant transformative ideas from the past.
2. People suffer because of social expectations around gender and sexuality. One response is to help them meet those expectations, whatever the cost in money or pain. Another is to dismantle the expectations.
3. In a capitalist culture, we are expected to solve our own problems – ideally by buying something. Experiences of identity that involve buying things – including objects and forms of body modification – can be very seductive.
4. A stable gender identity may be like an iPhone X: a lot of people tell you you need to get one – but probably you don't. Put another way, you might be OK just the way you are.
5. Once upon a time, there was a word for people who worked together to dismantle conventional gender roles. That word was "feminist." Feminism allowed women and men to occupy sexed positions in a wide variety of ways. Vernacular gay and lesbian subcultures also generated a wide array of non-normative gendered positions. None of these was perfect. But they challenged legal and medical authorities by creating viable alternatives to conventional forms of masculinity and femininity.

6. Authority does not give up easily.

7. One way to (re-)gain authority is to define a “problem” only you can solve. After activists in the 1860s tried to defend deviance from sex and gender norms by proposing that souls of one sex were trapped in the body of the other, more authoritative scientists rejected that theory: there wasn’t much science could do about mixed up souls and bodies. Now that doctors can intervene to change bodies using hormones and surgery, they’re a lot more interested in this theory. They’re less clear about why genders that don’t match sexed body should be considered a problem best solved by changing bodies, instead of changing gender norms. Or why gender-sex mismatches should be considered a “problem” at all.

8. Another way to (re-)gain authority is to suppress alternatives using rules and laws.

9. Foucault showed how the soft side of the medical and juridical authority to diagnose and accuse is the requirement to self-diagnose and confess. Requiring others to enunciate a stable gender identity as a requirement for further discourse is an assertion of authority.

10. The feeling of asserting authority can be very seductive. That doesn’t make it right.

11. The only ethical conclusion to the statement that begins “My pronouns are” may be “I and me.” Second and third person pronouns are other people’s utterances. Language is a social form, and demands for authority over other people’s speech should be carefully – and ethically – negotiated in relation to everyone’s investments in identity.

12. Our feelings of core identity can be both changeable and eccentric. For those who truly value diversity, that’s a good thing.

13. For some people, skepticism about medical discourses of diagnosis and cure, and about juridical structures of regulation and punishment, feels like a core identity. A high percentage of those people likely come out of “gay” and “lesbian” activist movements that contested terms like “homosexuality” as medical diagnosis and crime.

14. Gay cultures have a long history of subverting medical and juridical authority by playing with gendered language (if you don’t believe me, just ask *her!*). To play with gender can be hilarious. Or tragic. Or somewhere in between. But it is neither frivolous nor insignificant. To understand this form of play, start by looking at where today’s use of the term “queer” came from: New York subcultures of theatrical performance involving aggressive forms of drag and camp.

15. Let’s review! Those who consider it “progress” to juridically enforce rules about medically authorized standard forms of gendered address are encouraged to review Axiom 1. Those who imagine that veterans of gay and lesbian activism are likely to submit to such enforcement are encouraged to seek those folks out and review these

issues with them. Those who do not value what gays and lesbians feel and think about the importance of this history for their own identities are encouraged to review the definition of “diversity.”

16. Activists also remember the “sex wars” of the 1980s, when divisive arguments over supposedly essential sex characteristics (men violent; women peaceful) and prescriptions of terminologies (remember “womyn”?) squandered the social and political power of second-wave feminism.

17. Queer Theory emerged as an antidote to essentialist identity politics. Drawing on the forms of play in “queer” performance practices, Queer Theory contested diagnosticians’ claims to “know” sex – one’s own or anyone else’s – and resisted campaigns to dictate the nature of our identities and to legislate the forms of language we use to inhabit them. Queer activism picked up much of the social and political power lost by second-wave feminism, sustaining feminist challenges to medical and legal authority.

18. For some people an appreciation of language – patterns of grammar, nuances of meaning – feels like a core identity. A high percentage of those people probably turn out to be English professors.

19. The English language is rich in non-gendered – or humorously gendered – possibilities for pronouns. Consider the 19th-century term “thon” (a contraction of “the one”), or the more recent “herm” (from the trickster god Hermes, this term referred to the artificial phalluses used by the ancient Greek to mark boundaries and bring good luck). We could play with these.

20. Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me. Appellation and assault require different ethical registers. If we accept the phrase “rhetorical violence,” then shorten it to “violence,” we’re going to need another word for “violence.”

21. Another thought about language: Falling silent is not the same thing as being silenced. There are many forms of silence. These include sulking, which is childish. And shunning, which is a form of authority. To use claims of feeling silenced to demand that others be silenced is a paradox. Or just hypocrisy.

22. By the same token, questioning ideology is not the same thing as “gaslighting,” as anyone who has seen the movie *Gaslight* knows. If interrogating ideas makes you feel crazy, maybe there’s something a little crazy about your ideas. Insisting that any ideology is beyond interrogation is a form of authoritarianism.

23. Whose interests do the term “deadnaming” serve? Pronouncing death sentences may fulfill fantasies of authority, but describing parts of anyone’s history and experience as “dead” inhibits efforts toward self-acceptance and integration.

24. Organizing identity around victim status is not self-empowering. The implication that victims need protection by entities more powerful than themselves cedes agency and authority to those entities. Claiming the status of protector carries with it the seduction of authority. See Axiom 10.

25. We're all in this together. Instead of imposing ideology, let's try to have conversations that respect everyone's intellect and value a true diversity of experiences and points of view.

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