AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra, and today I'm joined by Dr. Beth Hubble, director of the Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies program at the University of Montana to talk about transgender histories. Now for the purpose of this conversation, we are including non-binary gender fluid and other identities under the very broad umbrella of “trans.” And we'll get more into the complexities of the words that we use to describe ourselves and each other later on. And I do also want to acknowledge that we are both cis women, so we're not speaking from lived experience, but rather as scholars of history and modern society. So first and foremost, can you please dispel any myths that people might have that cisgender is and always has been “the norm”?

BH: Way back in the day, my dissertation looked at masculinity in medieval French literature, but one of the things I focused on was male friendship and same-sex relationships and where those went over with each other. And so that's more coming from a queer perspective than a cis and trans perspective. But to me, looking at the ways that relationships between men and relationships between women were represented in medieval literature, opening up the mind and realizing that their understandings of gender and sexuality, even when they were in what we would see as heterosexual relationships, their understanding of those things were completely different from how we have them today. And so the idea that I could take a cisgender, heterosexual understanding from today and look at a relationship in the Middle Ages that **looks** like it's cisgender and heterosexual, when you read it for the details, it's not the same. People were not getting married for the same reasons. People were coming together for very different reasons and their understandings of those things were really different. And so shifting away from thinking of our normative models today. A book came out in like 2005, a book by an English medievalist named Karma Lochrie called *Heterosyncrasies* looked at how in the Middle Ages, maybe there was a binary sexual identity, but in no way was it gay and straight. It was chastity and everyone else. And so it was just degrees of sinfulness. I feel when looking at other cultures, at history, that if I can get my mind to let go of those normative structures around gender and sexuality as much as I can, that it becomes a much richer field to look at and you find things that people may not have noticed before when we go in just with what I would see as almost blinders. I think we do history a disservice if we don't question our own normative ideas about gender and sexuality and impose those unproblematically on the past.

AT: Well, and when we're talking about those blinders that you mentioned, a lot of that comes out of colonialism and the fact that European powers that went and occupied and dominated other countries very much imposed their own views of what gender and sexuality were. And so we see so much when we look at Indigenous cultures that, not looking at it through a colonialist lens that we all grew up with, you can see how much more variety there is in viewpoints and identities.

BH: So one of the things that has become increasingly important to me because I live in Montana, I live on stolen land, the university where I work is on Indigenous land that was stolen, and I went to high school in Montana, I went to the University of Montana for my undergraduate degree, I have a degree in history from the University of Montana, and I knew almost nothing about the Indigenous peoples of Montana. No one ever mentioned those things. And so it's been my students and colleagues, but largely my students teaching me about two-spirit identities and what that looks like, and me pushing myself to learn as much as I can so that I'm not saying ever to a student, “well, tell me, what is it like to be this identity,” because that's tokenizing. And so I teach a class on trans identities, and for two-spirit, we're having at least two, if not three, two are scheduled, one's already given a talk, a second one is giving one on Tuesday, where two-spirit people are coming to class to talk about their experiences of what it's like to be two-spirit in Montana, from different perspectives. And so that just already having, for me, looked at gender and sexuality in medieval Europe, and knowing very strongly what American colonialism looks like, and looked like, seeing the experiences of Indigenous peoples as being a really important place, a really important site to elevate.
I teach a class that's called Feminist and Queer Theories and Methods. One of the assigned books is

Decolonizing Methodologies by a Maori scholar, Linda Tuhiwai Smith. And that's our only methods book for a class that is a research class, is looking at Indigenous research methods as a way to counter how colonial research is, and really asking questions about who wrote this, why, where did they get their information, and those questions. That's been a huge focus for me, and I'm, as much as I can, trying to incorporate Indigenous voices and readings and texts into my classes to bring that perspective in, because just like I'm hesitant to try to present trans history or trans studies today, at the same time very hesitant to teach a group of students an Indigenous text, wanting to help them explore it. And so I often set it up to be like, “hey, let's learn this together.”

AT: You want to be an ally, but you don't want to present yourself as an expert on a topic that you don't have lived experience in.

BH: Yes, that's exactly right.

AT: I know that feeling well. Now, two of the things that I wanted to discuss were identity and terminology. And they're so intertwined that I don't know if we can even really untangle them. And one of the big issues with telling queer histories is that, generally speaking, the folks that we're talking about would not have used the same language and the same ideas that we use to describe themselves.

BH: Yes, and so this is something that I thought about, talked to other people about so much since I proposed teaching this class on trans identities, which I proposed in response to our LGBTQ+ student group, basically saying, “where are our classes?” And I said, “ah! Funding! Budget cuts! But I'll see what I can do.” And then giving them a choice of classes, and this is the class they wanted taught. And I went, “ah, I don't want to teach that by myself.” Really thinking about, how do you teach a history of trans people when that word is so new? In that class, my co-instructor did a lecture on Magnus Hirschfeld a week or two ago. And so looking at the early 20th century, some of the words that start with “trans” coming about there, how do I teach. I did Joan of Arc on Thursday. Can you think about Joan of Arc that way at all in terms of how you teach that topic? And so how do I teach that topic? How do we present this in a way that valorizes it? And so part of it was me looking at how trans scholars and historians and public historians have covered these topics. And if these are people that are being covered and talked about, then I felt pretty comfortable including them in this class.
I've started to, and I think I'm pretty comfortable with this, I'm defaulting a little bit to saying “queer” about a fair number of figures from the past where we really don't, we can't say trans, we can't say gay, because they just didn't have those concepts at that time. But their gender expressions or their sexual identities in their time were non-normative and also read as non-normative to us today. And so trying to figure out, how do you negotiate that. And I also tend to default to, so for today, if someone tells me this is how they identify, this is the terminology they use for themselves, that's fine, that is it, that is your terminology. What happens applying that terminology to someone from the past then becomes a question. Because I recognize that question of anachronism and it's also something that people have been accusing me of since grad school because I look at sexuality and gender in the medieval period. And so people telling me, oh, you can't look at it that way. And I'm like, “yeah, but why can I look at it your way? Your way is just the 21st century way anyway.” And so I've been fighting that kind of my whole life, that what I'm studying has merit.
So I'm gonna give an example here and it's actually a Roman emperor. And so the, I don't know if they're a podcast or a website, they have a book, they're called Rainbow History. And so they put out an Instagram Reel or YouTube Short, something like that, a little over a year ago about the North Hertfordshire Museum in England deciding to use she/her pronouns for the Emperor Elagabalus because Elagabalus, in what is written about this emperor appeared to potentially have been a trans woman. And my students thought it was wonderful. They all brought it to class, they'd seen it on Instagram, they loved it. They were all like, “isn't this cool? This is amazing.” And then this museum in England is actually changing pronouns. And then I read some

articles about it that made me really angry because they're saying, “Elagabalus was not trans, you cannot call - using “him” - trans.” And then one scholar saying that it somehow did a disservice to history to let students see Elagabalus as trans. And I thought, “but if my students come in super excited about this figure, and my only reaction is to shut it down and tell them they're wrong, rather than wanting to wanting to try to put it within historical context, acknowledge that some of the people that said those things about Elagabalus were absolutely attacking that emperor. Frequently calling men women forever has been a way to attack them. And was there a way with my students to do a both/and to say, “you can find some inspiration in this emperor. Let's understand what that would have meant in a Roman context,” if that makes sense. So not shutting it down in the way that I saw happening in some discussions online, but saying, “why did this museum make this decision? Why did they see it as valid? Why do you all find inspiration in this figure? And how might this figure have been understood in Roman history?” So that it's a both/and rather than an either/or shutting down of discussion around that figure, especially with the politics of today, having students find themselves and see that non-normative genders existed across time and can easily be shown to have existed. And maybe Elagabalus is a problematic example, but it just rubbed me the wrong way to think that only I get to decide how we talk about this figure, that students and their lived experiences have validity in the classroom as well.

AT: Well, something I've observed is that there seem to be two extremes when we're talking about queer and genderqueer histories, and neither of those extremes want to allow for nuance because we're very uncomfortable with uncertainty. We don't like “might” and “possibly” - we want to know what happened. (BH: Yes.) And so on one end, you do have the erasure folks who want to push this anti-queer narrative and pretend we haven't always been there. But on the other end, you have people who I would guess in general are just so desperate to see themselves in histories because they've been erased that they tend to push their own narratives on individuals without sufficient proof, which, I get it. It's completely understandable, but it's not helpful. And it can also prove divisive, including among the queer community.
So you might have a lesbian and a trans person arguing over whether a given person was a butch lesbian or a trans man, because both of these people want to see themselves represented. But that person can't be both things at once. But the possibility, it's Schrodinger's queer person - since we cannot open a box, they are both of those things to both of those people. But they both want to say, “no, this is definitely how it was,” even though we don't know that. Or lesbians might want to claim as a lesbian someone who would more accurately be described as bisexual or pansexual. Or I've seen a lesbian argue that Anne Brontë was a lesbian, when to me, it seems more likely that she was asexual. But I'm ace, so that could be my bias. But my understanding is, we don't have evidence that she was attracted to any gender and asexuality in particular is difficult to prove, because you have to prove the absence rather than the presence of something and untangle that from prudish societal norms. But that's my own rabbit hole. We're not here to talk about Anne Brontë. Point being, a lot of times, it seems like one group sees claiming a person as their own has to be definitive to the exclusion of other possibilities. And I just don't see that as an accurate way to try and understand history.

BH: Part of me, when things like that happen, and I'm watching people argue over someone like Anne Brontë, or even someone like Sappho, who I teach, is why are we arguing? We're all arguing for these non-normative experiences of gender and sexuality in the past. But I've witnessed what you said as well, and I often will approach it for something like lesbian, asexual, bisexual, all the things like that, and say, this debate that you're having or this argument, I don't know if it's a debate if neither side is willing to give, is somewhat moot in that, at that time, those words didn't exist in the English language, or whatever language that someone is arguing. So if you're arguing about homosexual/heterosexual is the easy one, or fighting about whether someone is gay or straight, well, I mean, those words didn't enter the English language, the dictionary, until the end of the 19th, early 20th century. And so to go back and put a label on someone and then really dig in about it, I think what you said about it not being a fruitful way to go, because what I think is more helpful politically and potentially for people on an individual level, is to say, these labels that we've defined for ourselves today, that's not how

people understood each other in the past. And if we can see things like gender and sexuality as actions or identities that shift and change over time, I think that opens conversations up rather than shutting them down. I tend to fall into, again, a both/and situation. I teach a class that looks at historical and literary perspectives, it used to be on women, and I shifted it to be more on gender and sexuality. But I always make the students in the class read the Book of Ruth from the Hebrew Bible. And I talk about, so we've already read Sappho and talked about Sappho's sexual attractions and how it's represented in her poetry. And it is not as cut and dry as people think it is today. She expresses desire for men and women. And then we read about, but I talk about female friendship and what happens when you're in an all-female community. Looking at Ruth and Naomi, Ruth who expresses undying love for Naomi, “where you go, I will go, until death do us part.” And knowing that for Catholic nuns, that is like the model of female friendship. And it could potentially be read as something more. And so I do the same thing with the German mystic Hildegarde of Bingen, whose most intimate, most important relationship was with a nun named Ricardis, who she loved. She writes in a letter, “I loved you so much, people said, ‘what are we doing?’” And what I say to students is we can never know if that was sexual, was it romantic or was it just their most intimate relationship?
But the way they describe it, we can open up to debate and trying to get people comfortable with the fact that for a lot of historical figures, we can never know 100% and we're always interpreting. And the most mainstream survey of American history textbook is still just interpretation. And so that's where I try to go with it and try to get students to try to - most of my experience talking about these things with students - is to try to get students to see why can't it be both/and? Why can't we just acknowledge that our own experiences mean we're interpreting these figures differently and we can't know how they understood it themselves? Because it is super tricky and I had a long conversation with my students yesterday. They pick readings for themselves in my capstone class and they picked a reading about he/him lesbians and I was fascinated, I'd not heard of such a thing. And so they're explaining it to me. And so in a butch lesbian way of butch lesbians who, in a relationship, don't see themselves as someone's girlfriend, but as someone's boyfriend, they want to be he/him, but they feel like they're lesbians. And I was like, “this is fascinating” as opposed to “this makes no sense to me”. It doesn't have to make sense to me. It's not my experience. So that's that spending a lot of my academic career going, “this doesn't make sense to me. There might be an article in that.” (laughter)

AT: That’s how we learn, by acknowledging that we don't understand something and seeking to understand it.

BH: Yes. So instead of shutting it down, because it would have gone really badly for me if I'd shut that conversation down. First of all, because they know me so well, they'd be like, “what are you doing?” They really like explaining things to their Gen X professor.

AT: I think that's also part of it, is we all want to feel like we know what's going on. And especially if we can explain that to someone else, particularly someone in a position of authority, that makes us feel good. Like it makes us feel smart. It makes us feel like we know the truth and we all want to know the truth. But a lot of times we can't know the truth. And we hate that.

BH: Yes, yes.

AT: It's interesting that you brought up the he/him lesbians, because one of the authors on your syllabus is Leslie Feinberg, who I think is a really interesting example of evolving understandings and terminology, because Feinberg described herself as transgender because people perceived her as male. But as far as I know, she never viewed herself as anything other than female. And she did use she/her pronouns. She described herself as “transgender lesbian female,” but she was assigned female at birth. So my understanding here is that she was basically conflating a butch gender presentation with a transgender identity. And also because she was an activist for trans people, she wrote seminal texts on trans experience. So people aren't

really rushing to say that she wasn't transgender. But by what I understand to be our current definition of, “you identify as a gender other than what you were assigned at birth.” As far as I can tell, she doesn't actually meet that basic criteria.

BH: And I'm going to say I agree. I do know that she and ze were pronouns that that Feinberg liked. One of the things I think about with Feinberg, and so I assign and have students read and I think it's from 1995, *Transgender Warriors* by Feinberg and so if we're looking at the ‘90s in terms of trans studies, it is just getting started. And so someone on the front lines of of working out what these terms meant and that book *Transgender Warriors* somewhat does what I'm talking about. It takes a personal, Feinberg's individual understandings and experiences and looks at, starts with two spirit identities, looks at Joan of Arc, looks at figures from across history and saying, “look, we've always been here.” And so yeah, I think Feinberg is really fascinating here. I know there is a quote of Feinberg, I may butcher the quote, but something like “I've been horribly attacked by people using the right pronouns for me and respected by people using the wrong” and so a more fluid acceptance of how people use the pronouns with Feinberg. And that is one of the reasons I like teaching Feinberg is because as a thinker and as a person, Feinberg really opens up the conversations around language and pronouns and things like that and how trying to fix them and fix definitions because yes, transgender, lesbian, female is fascinating to sit there and try to unpack and go, “well, if I define those this way, how did Feinberg define them?” And so, all of my students’ research papers, they have to have definition sentences. You can't just throw the word “woman” in a paper for me without telling me how you're using it. Because trust me right now, there are people in Washington DC using the word “woman” to mean something very different from how I mean it. And I think Feinberg is fascinating as as an example, and my students love, I have a couple of students that are like “*Stone Butch Blues* is my favorite book” and things like that. So playing with that butch identity and trans identity and where do I fit and the he/him lesbian and things like that. It's been really interesting watching students explore, what does it mean to be transmasc, as they were saying yesterday. Another student used the phrase trans femme. And I said, “I've not heard that before”. And the student's response was, “yeah, I hadn't either only my friend uses that.” And I thought, that's all interesting. I understand trans, I understand femme, I think I understand what they mean when they come together.

AT: Well, it's also generational, right? (BH: oh, 100%.) And in fact, I I really like “queer” because as someone who's ace, we often get left out of the alphabet soup version, or people think that the A stands for allies. It doesn't. So as an asexual person, especially given what I was saying earlier about, it's really hard to prove whether someone was ace or like, what was that category you were saying earlier was, there's chastity and then there's sin. (laughter) Like were any of those people asexual or was it just the social norms? A lot of times, aces can feel very left out of these conversations. And so I really like “queer” as an umbrella term. But there's also a generational aspect when we're talking about these terminologies, because as I understand it, there are a lot of older folks who largely internalize that term as a slur that came with violence and hatred. And I understand that later generations have reclaimed that and I am part of that. But I can also understand why there are a lot of members of the queer community that may find it hurtful. So it's complicated, it's messy.

BH: And I want to talk right now, because I said before, that that's the term I'm starting to use default. I need to explain what I mean when I say “use.” It is not a term I use to refer to people or a person. If someone tells me they're genderqueer, that's okay. I use queer to think about perspectives in the past as a way to look at non-normative things. When I'm talking every day in my life teaching, it is not a term I use to apply to anyone. Because I don't belong to that community. I'm not someone who's allowed to reclaim it and use it to say, “oh, that person's queer.” I'm of the generation, that was not a word I was allowed to say. I'm of the time when that was a slur. I watched it be reclaimed. I'm fine with queer studies, queer theory, those things. But it's not a word I feel comfortable using as an identity for a person I'm interacting with in any way. Or if I'm talking about one of my students, about the only time is that genderqueer. And I don't know how common that is anymore, about a

decade ago I had a student that identified that way. And so I became comfortable using that because of a particular student that I had. But when I say I use it, I use it in a theoretical or academic sense more than I use it as an identity marker because I don't think it's my word. And so I think that there are in-community words that people have that it's okay to use. But it's those in-community words that I'm never going to use. My students will use them about each other in front of me, and I will turn it in my head to something that is more neutral, that I think a more general audience like me can use because I never want to fall into that trap of, “well, my friend said that I could say this word.” No, that's not how, my one gay friend doesn't get to give me permission to use the word. And so, just to clarify what I mean when I say that I use it, it's more as a conceptual way to look at the past than as an identity marker for today. I am actually a fan of the alphabet because the LGBTQIA2S (AT: Plus!) Plus, all those things. Because I may quibble about complaining sexuality and gender in there, but to me it recognizes this, if you want to call it a spectrum, Judith Butler in their newest book and their transitioning around pronouns is fascinating too. But Butler calls it a mosaic. So all those things where for me continuing to emphasize that there's no binary when we're talking about current expressions of gender and sexuality, I hold pretty strongly to.

AT: Now, one of the issues that I have in the Infinite Women biographical database, as we're talking about how are we defining “women,” is that there are so many reasons for particularly a cis woman to present as male for practical purpose that has nothing to do with their gender identity. So say they wanted to go to war, they wanted to do a type of job, live on their own or just wear pants. I love pants. Let's just wear pants. But without a diary or letters or another first-person source, so like the diary of Anne Lister, another woman who loved pants, and as far as I understand it, identified as female, we just have no way of knowing whether their gender identity was even a factor. And so like I would never include someone like Elliot Page because he has clearly communicated his gender identity, but because I always favor inclusion over exclusion, especially when it comes to stories that are so often left out of history, I will include historical figures that are debatable, but I tag them as trans. I include an explanatory disclaimer that says, “I don't know this person's gender identity. It is entirely possible that this was a trans man, but since we don't know, I will include them.” I'll include non-binary folks if they use she/her pronouns, but I won't include someone who, for example, if they're a cis male drag queen. And so I have these nuances that I personally apply that I'm sure there are plenty of people who would disagree with any given criteria that I've mentioned here, but with all the uncertainty and nuance, do you think that trying to make definitive assertions are just not even possible a lot of the time? Because that's what it feels like to me.

BH: Yeah, unless we have someone that's written it down in a memoir today, Elliot Page being a great example, and we talk about him in my class, students can read his memoir. And you mentioned going to war, I'm going to be teaching later this semester, we do everything non-chronologically in this class, and teaching about the Civil War soldier Albert Cashier, who was AFAB, and lived as a man, didn't get done with the war, and “went to fight, going back to my husband,” lived as Albert Cashier. So yeah, I can see not including Albert Cashier, but I also know that there were a lot of women who fought in the Civil War because they wanted to fight, they wanted to go with their husband, they wanted to go for a lot of other reasons to go there. And then for me, the medievalist in me goes to Joan of Arc, we have no indication that at any point did she ever identify as anything other than a girl. And I'm saying girl because she was killed so young. But God told her to wear men's clothing. God told her to put men's armor on, told her to lead an army, told her to go to the heir to the French throne, because God had told her that she was going to lead the army, they were going to retake France, and he was going to get crowned. Where does someone like Joan of Arc fit? Because if God is telling you to wear men's clothing, I think that's a really interesting take on things in terms of what kind of clothes do you get to wear? But the other side of that is I don't think that had anything to do with gender identity. I think that had to do with, first of all, I think armor is going to help you not get shot by an arrow, those kind of things. But she also cut all of her hair off. And then the whole, her trial documents, the English, when she's captured,

that is what they're mad about, is that they can't get her to start wearing women's clothing. And that is what they are most concerned about in the heresy trials around Joan of Arc is her clothes. And I don't have a definitive answer here other than, here is someone who we actually have a fair bit of writing about, she couldn't write. We have signatures, she learned to sign her name, but people that supported her never say anything like, “oh, and Joan became John,” it's Joan of Arc, she.
Jumping forward for the American Civil War, and someone like Dr. Mary Edwards Walker, who wore men's clothing as well, although when asked about it, Walker, my memory is, said “they're not men's clothing, it's my clothing.” “I'm not wearing men's clothing, I'm wearing my clothing.”

AT: But then we have someone like Cashier or James Berry, (BH: Yeah.) where they were actively presenting as male living as male. But we can't definitively say because we don't have their words, largely because it would have been dangerous probably for them to have written a diary. (BH: Yes.) Not everybody had Anne Lister's privileges, I should point out. (BH: Yes.) But then, in your work, you also talk about, like, Hatshepsut, which if you go listen to the episode about queenly Image, we talk in there about how she wore a beard because that was what pharaohs wore. It was more part of the regalia rather than necessarily an indication of gender identity. But there are people like the Public Universal Friend, if you want to tell us about them.

BH: Yes. So, Public Universal Friend, who sometimes the researchers shorten to PUF, which is kind of fun, I would want to make sure that they were okay with that. But someone AFAB in colonial America, got sick, thought they were gonna die, woke up and said, “yeah, Jemima's gone, I'm Public Universal Friend now.” A Christian sect grew up around the Public Universal Friend and they lived the rest of their life in this persona as the Public Universal Friend, as a name, and was viewed in a way as a religious conversion. This colonial girl got sick, came out as this non-binary Christian leader, the Public Universal Friend. And so that was one where it was just, this is what they wore. And it was all, it was based around religion. It was based around following somewhat strict colonial America Protestantism. But also women can't preach - but the Public Universal Friend could. And so that's a complex one to talk about, but that's how they lived out their life. But they were also able to access privilege and authority in ways they wouldn't have been able to as a woman. And so a really interesting case. This isn't someone that went back to their previous way of life. They were committed to that and also accessed power they didn't have before.

Listen to Ellie Woodacre’s episode on Queenly Image or read the transcript.

AT: I think that's really what it comes down to is, there is power and privilege in not being a woman in a lot of history. And so it can be very difficult for us to untangle, was this internal? Was this how they felt as a person or was it external? “If I present as a man, I have all of this independence and these opportunities that I just don't have presenting as a woman.” And we just can't know, but that's no reason to try to put our own narratives on them or say, “oh, I definitely know what this person was or felt like.” And it is fortunately much easier the more we get into recent history. So like 1900s, there's a lot more clarity around figures like Christine Jorgensen or Marsha P. Johnson, Rita Hester, or Lili Elbe. We can much more definitively say, okay, no, we know because they communicated that.

BH: The thinking about, we get the terminology, words go into dictionaries starting in the 20th century, if not maybe potentially a little bit earlier. And while I have read and I talked previously about looking at a sexual identity between being like chaste and sexually active/sinful in the Middle Ages, I give a kind of yes to that. But I would also say in English or in French, in Greek, in Latin, in these languages where they don't actually have a word for homosexual. It was what you did, not who you are in terms of how it was understood. And so looking back at, when you look at someone like trans medieval saints, and there are a fair number of saints lives written, so you write a saints life as this kind of not example, but exemplar for people to live up to. And there

are these really famous ones, there's Eugenia, there's Euphrosyne, where they are girls, they're Christian girls, their pagan dads are trying to marry them off. They don't want to get married, so they get their servants to help them cut their hair and they go and join monasteries and live out their lives as men in monasteries. And somewhat, at least with Euphrosyne, similar to what happens closer to today in the 19th century and stuff, not found out until after they die. So this is a monk who's lived with these brothers their entire adult life. No one knows AFAB until death. And so, again, this person who went and lived as a man to escape marriage, to devote themselves to the church, and all of those things.
So how to understand something like that, and what the motivations were, knowing that they didn't write their own stories down. And may have been made up all along, because there's just not a lot of historical proof that they existed, but I'm just really interested in, that these aren't the stories that we get taught in history class. That the past offers us examples of gender and sexuality from the past that show us that it's never been as simple as cis and straight. And whatever motivated them to take on the persona of a man, it says something to me that these stories stop getting told. And we tend to focus on only certain people from history.

AT: I do think it's very telling that, apart from, obviously I have a femme bias, but I do find it very telling that we are talking pretty much exclusively about people who were assigned female at birth, seeking out other identities as opposed to the other way around. So someone like the Chevalier d'Eon, I believe is more of an outlier in this context where we're talking about people who were assigned female at birth have all of these reasons that they may have done this separate from their identity. And I think that's very much demonstrated in the fact that it doesn't tend to go the other way nearly as much, as far as I know.

BH: My academic background means that I know way more about European experiences. They would not have wanted to go the other way. The view of women in the Middle Ages was so, and had been, the erasure of the prominence of people like Mary Magdalene, things like that in the church. Famously St. Augustine wrote about his own mother, St. Monica, that her tears made her more virile so that she became more like a man, where you're like, "dude, can't you just let your widowed mother be a good mother? You have to say, 'oh no, my mom's worthy. See, her emotions are virile.'" And so it's a…

AT: That's a weird way to think about your mom, dude.

BH: Oh, he's a weird dude. So he is one of the most important theologians in the Catholic church and was fraught by guilt for his two long-term monogamous relationships with a woman.

AT: Well, but we're also getting into that fact that, like, who's writing the histories that we're reading in this Western context that we're talking about?

BH: 100%. You're not going to write the story of your monk friend who wanted to dress like a nun. You're writing these stories of women to show how to get closer to God. You get closer to God by acting more like a man.

AT: It's no coincidence that several of the people we've mentioned were basically like, God told me to do this.

BH: God told me to do this. And even my example of Hildegard, that's how she got able to preach. She wrote to the Pope and said, "God is giving me these visions. Are they okay?" And it's so obviously a construction to get permission to get her words out there. And so she plays up her femininity. And the Pope gave her permission to go on preaching tours. And so things like that, where it is who told these stories and why, and I think you can see in these medieval Christian examples is that idea of, "how do you get closer to God?" "Well, you have to become more like a man." So that's pretty messed up. Your other option was the Virgin Mary, and

that's a really hard ideal to live up to.

AT: As a teacher, you've utilized an interpretive practice that you call transglossing. So can you explain what that means?

BH: So what happened was I was getting ready to teach for the first time this class, Trans Identities Across Western Cultures. I'm a French medievalist. And a call for papers came out November with this class starting in January, a call for papers came out for a collection of essays called Marie de Trans. And so Marie de France is the first named author in old French, 12th century. And so it's about trans readings of Marie de France. That just means Mary from France. It's not actually a name. She wrote in England, apparently people called her Mary from France. And she wrote like three or four different kinds of texts, but her most famous are called lais, and they're little short Arthurian stories. And some of the gender in them is wild. And so I had proposed to do an article about what it was like to teach Marie's interestingly gendered lais in this trans identities class. And I went through the process you have to go through in the American university system to use student work. I did all of those things. I assigned these lais that I thought were the most interesting. But whenever I teach Marie, I teach a lai called Bisclavret. And it's essentially Marie's werewolf lai, just because it is just this wacky story. And it's about werewolves. It's fun. And so I went in to do this lecture on Marie to this group of students in this trans identities class, but we started the class with that in groups and they all share items connected to the readings for that week. And then we shift into the readings. No one wanted to talk about my lai at all. All they wanted to talk about was the werewolf. And so I'm supposed to be writing an article based on what they tell me about these lais that I've picked as the most interesting. They don't care about those at all. And there are two groups in the classroom. I'm leading one. My co-instructor Charlie is leading the other. And I yell over to Charlie, “what are you all talking about?” And Charlie's like, “we're talking about werewolves, what are you talking about?” (laughter) And so I literally had to, the abstract had been accepted. And so I call it the werewolf turn in the class.

And so there's a really fascinating line, I even have it tattooed in old French on my leg, in the prologue to Marie's lais where she says, essentially, “whoever comes after me can gloss the text and add their own surplus.” Glossing in the middle ages means all the writing out in the margins of a manuscript. And so St. Thomas Aquinas does it, people publish his glosses. That's important, but glossing just means adding in your own interpretation. Surplus is a good deconstructionist term and I'm like, look at Marie, the deconstruction queer theory person, I'm gonna talk about glossing. So I was calling it queer glossing in the original abstract. And then my class wanted nothing to do with that. Well, no, they thought that either term was fine. And so the trans glossing, what of meant was, here's this group of students reading very much through a trans theory lens, a large percentage of them identified as trans or non-binary as well. And when they read these stories from the Middle Ages, the one that stood out to them the most was the werewolf story about someone's transformation, alienation from his family because he transformed how the king and authority treated him, all those things, that was what resonated with them.

And so the paper turned into that. I literally say in the article, it's in a copy edit stage. I have a few more weeks to get the last copy edits in. The students are all co-authors, there're like seven authors listed on this paper. I made them all go through this human subject research test so they could be listed as authors. And I literally write it like a story, this is what happened to me trying to write this article. And I talk about Indigenous research methodologies. I talk about community-based participatory research, when you actually listen to your community and your audience rather than imposing your views on them, because I could have said, “no, we're talking about Lanval. We're not talking about Bisclavret, I know werewolves are fun, but that's not what we're talking about.” But instead I listened to them, Charlie did a whole lecture on queer horror. And so then one of the students for their final project crocheted a werewolf wearing trans pants. So for me, that idea of transglossing was this class about trans identities. And so it turned into when you're reading with that lens. When trans people, non-binary people are reading through their lived experiences combined with these

different trans theories, theories of reading, theories of writing, what are the possibilities that come out. And so that's where I ended up with this. So this medieval idea of glossing with trans theory thrown in, of if you can shift your view on these texts in the way that the class did, inspired by what Marie wrote in that prologue where she said, add your own surplus to it. They added their surplus to it and their surplus was, yeah, that gender, whatever, it's still just another knight story and the knight and the lady end up together. But let's check out this werewolf story where the people who seem to end up together are the king and the werewolf.
It's my favorite thing I've ever written. It is my favorite experience with a class that I've ever had because it just blew my mind to watch them interact with this text in that way. I look at other texts as well when they read texts and push back on me about my readings of them. You're talking about 12th century French literature. That's, my dissertation's on, almost everything I've published has been on that. I am the expert in the room. I read Old French, but my ability to say, "but I'm not the expert on how a trans person might read this text and how can it be read differently from a different point of view?"

AT: Well, and this is also something that I've noticed as an autistic person, there are a lot of historical figures that because we didn't have the language, they wouldn't have been called or identified as autistic in their time, but you read about certain traits and you're like, "yeah, no, that tracks." And I think it's very much, when your histories are not as readily available, there is that sense of, "we're going to guess. We're going to make an educated guess, but it can only ever be a guess." (BH: Yeah.) And one major barrier is that for a lot of people going back to gender identity, documenting their thoughts and feelings could have been dangerous or their families would have had reasons to destroy their documentation after death. So there's this great story about the diary of Anne Lister where about 50 years after she died, her like great-nephew and his buddy found her diary hidden in the wall of the house and they were able to decode it and read all of the stuff that's in Anne Lister's diary. And the buddy reputedly said, "oh no, you have to destroy this. This is going to be awful for your family's reputation." And the great-nephew, who I believe was also a queer man in his own right, didn't. He chose to put it back in the wall and it was re-rediscovered another 50 years later. And then it wasn't until another like 50 years after that, that someone actually started publishing about the queerness in the diary that they hadn't really been super keen in say the 1930s to be publishing in academic journals. But you can see, this is one of the most important pieces of documentation that we have in Western queer history. And we almost didn't have it because of this very common issue. And so I feel like a lot of times the anti-queer folks try to pretend that absence of proof is the same as proof of absence.

BH: Yes. As I think through that, my mind goes in a number of different ways, thinking of Jane Austen's sister burning all of her letters, or the way that Emily Dickinson's work was treated after her death, and the erasure of her relationship with her sister-in-law, I believe, things like that. But for me, it's one of the reasons that in this class that's supposed to be on history, this trans identities class, we read a fair bit of literature. Marie writing these stories in which there's a non-binary deer in one, and in another one, it's a world turned upside down, and the knight rides away on the back of the horse with the fairy queen to her land where she rules. And then there's this werewolf story, and while that is completely in this fantastical world, it wasn't being created out of nothing. And so just like today, our TV shows and movies and novels and things like that, there are still ways in which they reflect and construct the world around them, or push back against it in some way. We can read the things that she wrote and go, how is a woman negotiating the very masculine, very hierarchical world she's in? How is she pushing back against it? How is she, in her literature, her fiction, how can we start to see how might a woman have made her way in this world, and what things might she be pushing back against, and what ways might she have been making us look at gender constructions and sexual identity, things like that at that time. And so I think that to me is one of the ways to go back and say, okay, we may not have kind of some of the historical proofs, but we have texts that show that people were trying to work through the complexities of gender in these other times. You can trace into the early modern European period, all of these writings from the 16th century in France about hermaphrodites. They were obsessed with hermaphrodites, and it's the birth of

modern medicine and the age of moving up to the scientific revolution, things like that. And as they start moving away from religion into science and start trying to figure things out. But that's my convoluted answer to, how do we find these places in history when they don't exist? Well, Marie in the Middle Ages didn't make that up out of nothing.

AT: So on previous episodes, I've drawn parallels between today's TERFs, or trans-exclusionary radical feminists, if you're not familiar, and racist suffragists of a century ago, or homophobic second-wave feminists like Betty Friedan. Basically every generation has their bigoted feminists who want rights only for women like them. And unfortunately, we got the TERFs. I don't believe that you can be a feminist and be transphobic. Would you consider there to be a fundamental link between trans rights and women's rights?

BH: Yes. I don't think that TERFs should be allowed to have the F in their name. I do not think you can be against trans women and be a feminist. It does not process in my brain. The only way that I am able to understand and teach about feminism is through an intersectional lens. And so it's always struck me as the height of arrogance to think that my very privileged experience of being a woman is somehow universal, because I can't separate it from being white, cis, straight, upper-middle class, all those things. And that my gender identity intersects with my other identities, and it's not different for a trans woman, that trans women are women. I often do a definition activity with my students where I say, “define what ‘woman’ is. Define the word ‘woman.’” And then they get very frustrated with me. They say, “well, do you mean science? Do you mean genes? Do you mean, what…” and I'll be, “I don't know, what do I mean?” And then I tell them that there's a right answer, and they get even more frustrated with me. And more and more they get the right answer, but five, ten years ago they did not. Because to my mind, the only definition of “woman” that I accept is someone who considers themselves a woman. If you tell me you're a woman, if you tell me you're a man, if you tell me you're non-binary, I don't need anything else to prove it to me.
When we talk about trans rights and women's rights, an example that has come to me more and more is when we talk about reproductive justice. Because the fight that's being fought there is for bodily autonomy. And I don't think you can separate a reproductive justice fight for bodily autonomy from the fight for gender-affirming care. And as someone who has had no trouble getting progesterone and estrogen for menopause, had no problem getting a gynecologist to perform a hysterectomy on me, I don't think that my perspective on bodily autonomy should take precedence. My role is to be an ally to people who can't access those things. That could be because of race, that could be because of socioeconomic status, but it could also be because of gender identity. And so that's the one to me that is just, that fight for reproductive justice is a fight for bodily autonomy. And that links the fight for trans rights and women's rights in such a profound way. And it's also, to go on the other side, there's not a surprise that the same people that are trying to take away birth control are also opposing gender-affirming care. That links those things really, yeah, it's shocking. And so that's where I fall with that, is that it's my job as a very privileged white woman to elevate the voices and the causes of people that don't have the privilege that I have. But I just don't see not letting people define themselves for themselves. If you tell me you're a woman, you're a woman. I don't need a birth certificate. I don't need someone to check at the bathroom door. That's really creepy. And I'm really creeped out by people that are obsessed with the bathrooms, because you don't think that unless you've thought about it.

AT: One of the things that you're looking at that's not about medieval France, a bit more contemporary research that you're doing is about the migration of queer youth in the age of Trump. So what does that look like?

BH: It's both the migration of queer youth and the migration of queer people overall. So I'm working with a group of faculty and students, and we are recording oral histories of trans and queer people from Montana who are moving to other states where they feel safer, where they can access care. That includes families who have left Montana for other states where they know their kids will be able to continue accessing gender-affirming

care. But it was also in response that the Montana legislature in 2023 passed one of the many notorious “don't say gay” bills. And so in our public schools in Montana, you're not allowed to share pronouns. You're not allowed to do those things. So it became a very hostile environment. Families who've left, we have friends who've left, we've had colleagues who've left. And our fear is that if we don't get these stories down, we will lose these stories. Because one of the heartbreaks, and I'm not equating these things, but we lost a generation of gay men's stories because of the AIDS crisis. And with us, it's our friends are gonna leave, we're gonna lose track, our lives are hectic and busy and stressful, and we have to get these stories down, we don't wanna lose them. And we also wanna track a queer drain from Montana. These were people that were contributing important things to our society, and queer people have always been here. Sammy Williams, who died in 1910 as a trans cowboy, and not to mention that we live on Indigenous lands, and Indigenous peoples who did have more than two genders. And so we have families that are terrified for their kids, we have students who are scared for their lives, who are looking for ways to get to places that feel safer. And it was when we first started talking about it, and one of the people that was on the committee is younger than me, my kid's in college, said, “oh yeah, my daughter has several, has lost a few friends at school because their families have moved.” And we all went, “oh God.” I mean, all of this needs to be written down. But we were not aware of the extent of how many people, and this is not just a Montana thing, there are several states right now that have groups that are working on getting the stories down of people leaving.

AT: Well, we've talked about repeatedly in this conversation, the importance of documentation and the lack of documentation of these stories. And so from a future historian standpoint, it's great that you are documenting these for that future knowledge. But do you also hope that activists, for example, can use these stories that you're collecting to try and reason with the bigots making the decisions to do these things?

BH: I think that ship has sailed. What I want to think about here, this is a correlation, not a causation thing.
I want to influence the people that I call potential allies. And so it's people who are the progressive cishet men, but trans issues don't cross their paths that much. And so them going, “what are you talking about, your friend just moved? What are you talking about, your colleague left the state?” So it's the people that hadn't risen as one of the things, they might be focused on immigration. They might be focused on climate change. They might be focused on those things and to recognize that these things are interrelated. That's who we hope to reach. We actually know on campus because we've shared it out, that it has sunk in with administrators. They have said to me, “you let me know if someone comes to you and says that they've been harassed and they're planning to leave.” So it's the people that it may not enter their everyday lives that we want to impact.
And what I'm saying with them, our legislature is meeting right now. We are a citizen legislature. We only meet every other year. The Republicans lost their super majority in this, in this legislature. Shockingly, we have two openly trans legislators. One is Zooey Zephyr. She got national notoriety in 2023 because they kicked her out of the legislature because she was fighting the anti-trans bills. She got re-elected.
What happened in the last week is that the, our moderate Republicans jumped ship to the Democrat side. And it's not that we're passing progressive bills, but they're finally, the grandstanding and the meme-producing has finally stopped. And so we passed Medicaid and a couple other things that, just nothing was happening at our legislature because it was all in-fighting. And then a group of enough moderate Republicans jumped to the other side to say, “we're only here for 90 days every two years. We have to get these things done.”

AT: Join us next time on the infinite women podcast. And remember, well behaved women rarely make history.