

Finding **Pride**: *Teaching Trans History in Secondary Social Studies*

Joanna Batt and Jaden Janak

During the month of June, citizens around the world celebrate Pride Month—a time that among other things honors the “T” in LGBTQ2IA+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning, Two-Spirit, Intersex, Asexual and other identities outside cisgender and heteronormative identities), recognizing trans people living out and proud. Pride parades, inspired by 1969’s Stonewall Uprising, represent a collective queer refusal to be ignored, oppressed, or criminalized. Like the month itself and all it acknowledges, public education and specifically the social studies curriculum has an opportunity to increase awareness on the historical narratives of transgender or “trans” people (those whose gender identity differs from the sex assigned at birth). LGBTQ2IA+ figures are often forgotten or deliberately erased from school curriculums. If included for other reasons, their queerness is frequently left out. The impact of this erasure is compounded by recent laws from states such as Florida, Idaho, and Texas that ban any and all discussions of LGBTQ2IA+ issues in schools and have even directly targeted the safety of trans children and their families.¹

Queer or trans students can internalize these laws and the lack of trans people in the curriculum as evidence that they do not exist or matter. This in turn can leave them feeling alone and ostracized, undervalued both by the history they learn and the present-day policies that threaten their personhood and senses of belonging.²

The social studies classroom is a key site for deepening knowledge and providing support for trans stories, which can disrupt cycles of discrimination facing trans students today. By teaching

trans history, educators can push back against policies trying to harm trans lives and legacies, spotlight trans agency and resistance, and invoke socially-just responses to issues still plaguing trans communities.

In this article, we highlight how trans voices and experiences are missing in social studies classrooms and research; we share our experiences teaching trans history and narratives at the university teacher-training level; and we offer an interactive lesson plan, complete with original art, for students to learn about unsung, intersectional trans historical figures in the United States.

Teaching Trans History Pedagogy

The focus on human rights, civil disobedience and counter-narratives in the social studies makes it a natural fit for teaching trans history. But if LGBTQ2IA+ history is underrepresented in social studies curriculums, then trans history is even more sidelined.³ It is less that the line is moving and more that it is nearly invisible altogether.

Over the course of 2020 and 2021, we taught three class sessions on the importance of teaching queer and trans histories with K-12 preservice teachers in their graduate and undergraduate social studies methods coursework. Jaden, a Black transmasculine queer person who uses the pronouns they/he, acted as a guest speaker, sharing their organizing and research experiences at the nexus of Prison Abolitionist Studies and Trans Studies. Joanna, a white queer cis woman who uses the pronouns she/her, was the class instructor tasked with teaching social studies methods with social justice. Utilizing a mix of gender theory

and trans-affirming pedagogy, with Stonewall as the history lesson example, these three classes raised awareness on creating safe classroom environments for trans students and building lesson plans to educate all students on the importance of trans history. Each class presented hopeful breakthroughs and deeply difficult challenges for us and preservice teachers.

Our two biggest takeaways? One, vulnerable growth, content understanding, and overall pedagogical strides can happen when it is not the *first time* preservice teachers are taught a lesson on gender, sexuality, and LGBTQ2IA+ history, let alone trans history. When it was the initial time preservice teachers were coming into contact with the concept of pronouns (meaning, assignments of gender identity and expression such as she, he or they), or with teaching history inclusive of the LGBTQ2IA+ community, it was challenging to gain the traction necessary for understanding the complex importance of issues affecting trans students. Yet more hopefully, our second takeaway was that even if it was the first time students were exposed to such content and discussions, the key ingredient needed for teaching trans history was a *willingness* to both learn and teach it. It was not the preservice teachers who came in with the most prior content knowledge who built vastly creative, inclusive lesson plans in those sessions. Instead, it was those who wanted to know more and truly believed there was value in teaching the topic. These preservice teachers came to understand that trans narratives matter, and it became clear in post-class feedback and assignments that they later incorporated trans history into their own practice and lesson plans with students.

Teaching trans history with integrity and consistency is not one lesson—it is more process than goal. But all processes must start somewhere, and the more curricular examples we have of teaching trans history, the more we as educators can build future lessons that deepen understandings of trans lives and legacies as they center them. What follows is our example of an opener lesson on trans history for secondary students.

A Lesson to Start the Conversation

The four figures profiled in this lesson—Charley Parkhurst, Lucy Hicks Anderson, Miss Major and

Ryka Aoki—span multiple time periods, races, classes, and experiences, but all share an undeniable impact on U.S. history, reinforcing the fact that trans and queer people has always existed. Each transgender person in this lesson lived significantly historical lives including and also outside of their gender identity and expression.

- **Charley Parkhurst**, or “One-Eyed Charley,” was born in 1812, orphaned as a child in New England, and ran away to become a stable hand and began to live as a man. After traveling to California as an adult during the Gold Rush, Parkhurst, who was white, became a noted stagecoach driver. His trans identity was discovered only after his death in 1879.
- **Lucy Hicks Anderson**, one of the earliest recorded Black trans people in U.S. history, was a well known socialite, chef, and entrepreneur. Born in Kentucky in 1886, early on she insisted on wearing dresses to school and renamed herself “Lucy” with support from her parents and doctors. A pioneer for marriage equality, she married soldier Rueben Anderson in 1944 and spent most of her life in California.
- **Miss Major Griffin-Gracy** is a Black activist for trans rights, feminism and abolition. Born on the South Side of Chicago in 1940, Miss Major came out as transgender in the 1950s, participated in Chicago’s drag balls and New York’s Stonewall uprising, and became the original executive director of the Transgender Gender Variant and Intersex Justice Project in San Francisco.
- **Ryka Aoki** is a Japanese American poet, author of books such as *Why Dust Shall Never Settle Upon This Soul*, and professor of English at Santa Monica College. A former national judo champion, Aoki founded the International Transgender Martial Arts Alliance. She is also the winner of the Academy of American Poets’ University Award and a two-time Lambda Literary Award finalist.

The lesson fits best in U.S. history classrooms but works in any secondary social studies setting. Students will learn about trans people as historical actors in the past and present through hands-on group collaboration. Their work will produce four portrait posters, one for each figure, pieced together by numbered historical clues. The entire lesson plan, with biography clues and original

poster art, is available to download and print from *Social Education's* website.

The resulting portrait posters can stay up year-round, increasing trans visibility in your school. It is a powerful thing for all students to tangibly see *themselves* somewhere in the classroom. These portraits and the stories behind them

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Lesson plan

Time: One 40-minute class session, with 10 minutes for teacher prep

Prep:

- Download and print poster art and adjoining bio clues (sized at 8x11 or standard size) available on the NCSS web page for this article using the QR code below.
- Cut the print-out on the dotted lines so that the poster is in nine squares, with a clue on the back of each square.
- Repeat this process for the next three posters. Mix up all squares so pieces are shuffled.



- Print the pdf double-sided so the clues are on the back and the image on the front.

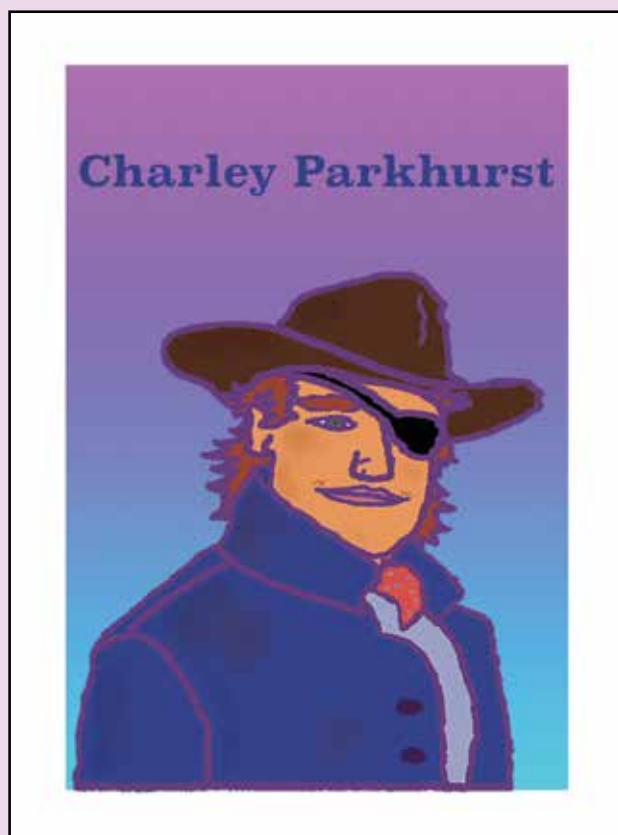
At right are the clues for the Miss Major Griffin Gracy poster (see top left quarter of page 173.

1. I took part in the Stonewall Uprising in New York City.	2. I served as the Executive Director of the Transgender Gender Variant and Intersex Justice Project in San Francisco.	3. I was born on the South Side of Chicago on October 25, 1940.
4. I was the subject of a documentary on my life entitled <i>Major!</i>	5. I supplied medical resources and aid to those affected by the HIV/AIDS epidemic.	6. I advocate for transgender and gender non-conforming people who are incarcerated.
7. I came out as a transgender in the 1950s; I'm a self-proclaimed feminist and raised five sons.	8. I was pushed out of two colleges due to my gender expression and identity.	9. I participated in the drag ball scene as a young person; I described it like going to an Oscar show today!

Directions:

- Divide students into groups of four, giving each group a random selection of nine squares, providing tape to piece together their poster as they go.
 - Explain that they have 20 minutes to collect and assemble their group's biography of clues and the ensuing portrait of a trans historical figure.
 - Let students know that they will work with other groups to find the pieces they need to complete their portrait; and that once they do, they'll briefly share the biographical facts explaining who the person is, along with the finished portrait, with the rest of the class.
 - Set a timer for 20 minutes; consider playing some music by trans artists and other queer anthems in the background—if you're not sure what that sounds like, we have created a YouTube playlist—search "Queer Anthems for the classroom" in YouTube or go to www.youtube.com/watch?v=3pmt-wWzC1E&list=PL1A5_qBRKEtup9KjbP6LtoZOmBx4zITyP.
 - If students are struggling with collecting pieces that they need, remind them that each figure has clues that match each other in theme (e.g., Charley Parkhurst's clues revolve around the West; Ryka Aoki's around being a writer) and that each poster has its own color scheme.
 - Once students have finished their poster, have them stand up and share the visual with their peers, taking turns to read the nine facts on the back to the rest of the group.
- After all four groups have shared (and any remaining class time has perhaps been spent reflecting on if students knew of these historical figures before, and if not, why they think they should), hang the posters prominently in your classroom so students can continue to view them the rest of the year.

The four, 2-sided posters used in the lesson. Original artwork by Fox Ostrowski and Andy Daza.



Resources to Continue the Conversation

This lesson plan works best as an opener/conversation starter about trans history and people. Our list of trans figures is in no way complete, nor is the lesson. Teaching trans history should be year-round and intersectional (read: not white, classed or ableist). Student-organized research projects on who else should be taught in trans history, outreach to local trans community groups for class speakers, action pieces on how to aid trans causes are all possible expansions of this work. The following offer powerful leads on how to keep the inquiry and discussion going long after the lesson is over.

BOOKS FOR FURTHER READING.

These act as primers on trans history and its place in greater queer movements for supplemental reading, analysis and class projects:

A Queer History of the United States for Young People (Beacon Press, 2019), by Michael Bronski, adapted by Richie Chevat, shares lives from Revolutionary war heroes to trans teen activists.

Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to Marsha P. Johnson and Beyond (Beacon Press, 1997), by Leslie Feinberg, and *Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution* (Seal Press, 2017), by Susan Stryker both give memoir and speech excerpts, pop culture commentary, and historical figure biographies.

All Out: The No-Longer-Secret Stories of Queer Teens throughout the Ages (Harlequin Teen, 2018), edited by Sandra Mitchell, anthologizes historical fiction by 17 queer YA authors who set narratives everywhere from 1870s Mexico to 1970s New York.

Queer, There, and Everywhere: 23 People Who Changed the World (HarperCollins, 2017), by Sarah Prager, illustrated by Zoe More O'Ferrall, is an entry point into queer history for middle schoolers.

Stonewall Riots: Coming Out in the Streets (Harry N. Abrams, 2019), by Gayle E. Pitman, narrates gay U.S. history via object-based learning of 50 historical items.

PRIMARY SOURCES FOR FURTHER ANALYSIS.

The Stonewall Reader (Penguin Classics, 2019), an extensive multimedia collection edited by the New York Public Library.

Loud and Proud (White Lion Publishing, 2020), 40 LGBT speeches with stunning graphics and historical context by Tea Uglow.

Real Queer America: LGBT Stories from Red States (Little, Brown and Company, 2019), part memoir, part interview compilation by trans reporter Samantha Allen.

University of Washington's library's LGBTQ primary source collection, <https://guides.lib.uw.edu/research/history-lgbtq/primary>.

Library of Congress's *LGBTQ Activism and Contributions* primary source collection made for teachers, with lesson plan suggestions, www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/lgbtq-activism-and-contributions.

The New York City Trans Oral History Project, <https://nyctransoralhistory.org>.

University of Minnesota's *Tretter Transgender Oral History Project*, www.lib.umn.edu/collections/special/tretter/transgender-oral-history-project.

References for Lesson Plan Clues

Ryka Aoki. "Bio," <https://rykaryka.com/bio>.

Mason Funk and Miss Major Griffin-Gracy. "Oral History Interview by Mason Funk" (July 27, 2016), www.theoutwordsarchive.org/subjectdetail/miss-major.

Owen Keehnen. "Lucy Hicks Anderson," <https://legacyprojectchicago.org/person/lucy-hicks-anderson>.

Raquel Willis. "TransVisionaries: How Miss Major Helped Spark the Modern Trans Movement." *Them.us* (March 8, 2018), www.them.us/story/transvisionaries-miss-major.

Bryan Kennedy. "The Fearless Character of One Eyed Charley," <https://outhistory.org/exhibits/show/tgi-bios/charley-parkhurst>.

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are reminders for all students that they matter, especially if they feel absent from the annals of traditional history textbooks and lesson plans. Curriculums must be diverse reflections of the full sweep of the history we teach, and the students we teach it to.

Before You Begin

Ideally, a few things will take place before the lesson comes alive in the classroom. First off, this should not be the first time students learn of LGBTQ2IA+ movements and people, including the trans community. Second, take a moment to pause and think about who your students are—what reminders will you need to share with the class to make sure students who identify as queer are not put awkwardly on the spot as ‘experts,’ or othered? How will you guide students if they eschew the joy and agency of trans lives and become focused only on traumatic aspects? For help here, consider setting aside time and space to establish students’ prior knowledge when it comes to LGBTQ2IA+ history. The day before the lesson, lay some groundwork by introducing LGBTQ2IA+ alphabet meanings and the concept of trans identity, perhaps with help from one of the books we list on page 174, and ask students for anonymous questions they have concerning

trans history as an exit ticket, or a task to complete before they walk out the door for the day. This gives you feedback to gauge where students stand so you can lesson scaffold to their differentiated levels of understanding.

Lastly, we understand as educators ourselves that teaching this subject matter is no small feat. We invite teachers to try reframing the lesson as something that fits into the teaching they are already doing. For example, Texas social studies standards, known as TEKS, ask for “the use of a variety of rich primary and secondary source material” when teaching U.S. History, especially from “museums, historical sites, and local and state preservation societies.”⁴ The state university archival center Portal to Texas History’s LGBT Collection has over 14,000 primary sources online, from objects to photographs, in eight languages spanning nine decades in an expansive digital exhibit.⁵ Such vibrant local LGBTQ2IA+ history certainly has a place in the classroom and closely ties to this standard.

You might also consider sharing lesson plans ahead of time with an administrator that you trust so communication lanes are already opened, or working with a larger team of teachers to increase solidarity and lessen workload. The lesson is interdisciplinary in nature, so it connects well to other art, ELA, government, economics, and physical education projects and lessons. ■

Notes

1. Giselle Rhoden, “Florida Isn’t the Only State Pushing Legislation That Could Be Harmful to LGBTQ Students,” CNN (March 11, 2022), www.cnn.com/2022/03/10/us/states-anti-lgbtq-legislation-florida/index.html.
2. Lisa Selin Davis, “Transgender Children and Their Parents Struggle to Cope with New Restrictive Laws,” CNN (June 22, 2021), www.cnn.com/2021/06/14/health/trans-kids-care-state-bans-wellness/index.html.
3. Stephen Sawchuck, “LGBT History Gets Short Shrift in Schools. There’s an Effort to Change That,” *Education Week* (September 5, 2017), www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/lgbt-history-gets-short-shrift-in-schools-theres-an-effort-to-change-that/2017/09.
4. “Resources for the Streamlined Social Studies TEKS, Curriculum Standards,” Texas Education Agency, 2018, Text of 19 TAC Chapter 113, Subchapter C, High School, pg. 6.
5. The LGBT Collections in The Portal to Texas History. University of North Texas Libraries, <https://texashistory.unt.edu/explore/collections/LGBT>.



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