

WRITING LESSON

‘THEY’ AND THE EMOTIONAL WEIGHT OF WORDS



In the YES! Magazine article, “‘They’ and the Emotional Weight of Words,” Cole, founder of the Brown Boi Project, welcomes the expanding list of gender pronouns. Pronouns can help us all learn to see and respect each other’s identity. Instead of cultivating fear, shame, and embarrassment around not knowing the right thing to say, Cole encourages us to create new approaches to language so we feel freer and more open with each other.

Students will use Cole’s article to write about how they feel about this expansion of gender pronoun language.

Part 1: The Article “‘They’ and the Emotional Weight of Words”

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Part 3: Writing Guidelines

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Part 5: Sample Essays

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- “Language is a Many-Gendered Thing,” by Ella Martinez, grade 9
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“They” and the Emotional Weight of Words

Even in the smallest of interactions—like how we use pronouns—we can create connections that allow us to challenge one another on our assumptions about gender.



Photo by FotografiaBasica / iStock.

By Cole

Language is the space in which we carve a place for ourselves, where we demand to be seen. A reflection point for culture, community, and family to acknowledge our existence on our terms. For decades, “butch” was the only identity and term available to those of us who identified as “masculine of center.” Like many others, I lived in that space. There was much about it that I loved: the community of brotherhood, the worship of femininity, the gentility of the old-school butches. Yet, like so

many other words, butch failed to capture the full depth of my soul. Its White cultural origins and resulting denial of my Black body took its toll.

I went in search of myself. I took a detour on the road to law school and, instead, went to study gender at the London School of Economics. The lone student in my Gender Research program, I cobbled together stories, interviews, and research on how our gender

identity and expression become language that makes us visible in the world. In the powerful piece from the disability justice movement, “Disease Is Not A Metaphor,” essayist and librarian Cyrée Jarelle Johnson argues that “there are not more important things to think about than words, because the things that you say are the substance of your thoughts, which become the things that you do and the biases you keep close to your chest.”

Over the past decade, young people of color

“There are not more important things to think about than words.”

have created an alternative conversation around identity that has since spilled into everyday lives. From social media to college campuses and community spaces, the emergence of terms like “boi” has challenged the language and imagination of people everywhere. Instead of he or she: “they.” And they are using multimedia platforms to push the boundaries of the understanding of masculinity and femininity. It’s hard work. The daily pushback against a world that is constantly trying to make you stay in a gendered box makes you resilient but incredibly tired. Doing it in a way that offers people the humanity they themselves sometimes deny to you requires grace.

Almost every day, whether at work or standing in line at the grocery store, we too often miss opportunities to meet someone where they are in their gender understanding and help them change the way they think about gender. Instead, we’ve made it perfectly normal to educate someone by “checking” them on their lack of understanding. This approach inadvertently creates a call-out culture that reinforces hypermasculine negativity. One of the most powerfully feminine things one can do is to create; it’s a courageous act. We should be encouraging people to create and build new

ways of approaching language, not cultivating fear and shame around not knowing the right thing to say. The way forward starts from a place of vulnerability and love. A daunting feat, yet, in my life and work, it has been profoundly moving.

It begins with relationships. Even in small interactions, we can create connections that allow us to challenge one another with a goal of greater understanding. At restaurants, I gently let folks know we don’t go by “ladies” and offer up “folks,” “peeps,” “homies,” and “fam” instead. When they inevitably apologize, I remind them that we are only just meeting. How would they know the language I choose to reflect myself? I have no expectation that they will know my preferred pronoun. The interaction makes it clear that they should not simply assume gender preferences and that asking is actually welcomed.

Pronouns can be the basis from which all of us learn to see and respect each other’s identity. “What pronoun do you prefer?” is always welcome. It shows respect, intention, and commitment to see me as I see myself.

The entire lexicon for how we understand gender is shifting. For many of us, it can be a weighty, disorienting experience. But for a handful of us, this is a moment of freedom. If each of us does our part to challenge old language that pushes us back into small gender boxes, all of us will be a bit more free. Eventually we will align language with the complexity and beauty of our bodies and our authentic selves.

Part 2: The Writing Prompt

Society is shifting from a binary “he-she” world to a more fluid spectrum of gender identities. As Cole points out, pronouns can be the basis from which all of us learn to see and respect each other’s identity. Some people feel awkward or uncomfortable with this transition, asking questions like, “What’s with this ‘they’ thing?” Others find it freeing.

Is there anyone in your life—you included—who is not comfortable being referred to as “he” or “she”? Write a letter to Cole on how you feel about this expansion of gender pronoun language. How do you deal with this cultural change?

Part 3: Writing Guidelines

The writing guidelines below are intended to be just that: a guide. Please adapt to fit your curriculum.

- Provide an original essay title.
- Reference the article.
- Limit the essay to no more than 700 words.
- Pay attention to grammar and organization.
- Be original. Provide personal examples and insights.
- Demonstrate clarity of content and ideas.

Common Core State Standards:

This writing exercise meets several Common Core State Standards for grades 6-12, including W. 9-10.3 and W. 9-10.14 for Writing, and RI. 9-10 and RI. 9-10.2 for Reading: Informational Text. This standard applies to other grade levels. “9-10” is used as an example.

How did this lesson work for you and your students?
Share your feedback with us and other teachers
by leaving a comment on our website:
<http://bit.ly/2j4aGOZ>

Part 4: Evaluation Rubric

Our rubric should serve as a guide, not an unreasonable or rigid standard. You've probably encountered similar rubrics before, but here are two quick pointers for using ours:

1. In the left column, find the criteria for evaluating essays.
2. In the top row, find scores from 4 (outstanding) to 1 (poor).

	4	3	2	1
Focus on topic	There is one clear, well-focused topic. Main idea is supported by detailed information.	Main idea is clear, but general.	Main idea is somewhat clear, but there is need for more supporting evidence.	Main idea is not clear. There is a seemingly random collection of information.
Organization	Details are placed in a logical order and the way they are presented effectively keeps the reader's interest.	Details are placed in a logical order, but the way they are presented sometimes make the writing less interesting.	Some details are not in a logical or expected order, and this distracts the reader.	There is no clear introduction of the main topic or structure of the paper.
Originality and strength of ideas	Formulates a thought-provoking, well-developed, and fairly original position on an issue.	Writer takes a clear position on an issue, though it is not developed fully.	Writer's position is evident, though it is vague.	Fails to take a clear position, or writer contradicts himself.
Evidence and/or reasoning	Provides specific reasons and/or evidence that demonstrate understanding and insight.	Offers adequate – though perhaps vague or incomplete – supporting reasons and/or evidence	Provides less than adequate or contradictory reasons or evidence to support position.	Offers only general reasons or evidence or none, or offers evidence contradictory to the writer's thesis or main idea.
Command of grammar and conventions	Command of conventions exhibited. Creative word choice and varied sentence structure.	Correct use of grammar and conventions (for the most part).	Weak control of grammar and conventions. Errors are distracting.	Use of grammar and conventions interferes with understanding.
Voice	Author's voice is strong and engaging. Draws reader in.	Writing attracts reader's interest. Author's voice shows engagement with the topic.	Technically well written; however, author's voice is weak.	Writing fails to engage the reader. Does not demonstrate writer's interest in topic.

* Adapted from "Rubric for Editorial – Commentary Essay" from LAEP.org and "6+1 Traits of Writing Rubric" from ReadWriteThink.org.

A New Design for Language

By Alex Gerber, grade 8

My mother has a friend whose daughter has recently decided she does not associate with either gender. This switch seemed strange to me at first. I asked my mom what people who identify with both or neither genders are called. I know about transgendered people, but not identifying with a gender is new to me. My mother said this is called “genderfluid.” Okay, so now I know what genderfluid means, but what do I call that person?

“They” seems like an appropriate name to call everyone, so no one gets associated with the gender they do not identify with; however, I don’t know how this could become an international change. Would everyone switch to using “they”? It doesn’t seem possible. For example, in Spanish, “they” is either “ellos” or “ellas,” which implies male or female. How could all languages that have masculine and feminine pronouns for “they” switch to using one pronoun? I’m not saying I don’t want to change the language we use to accommodate people who are gender fluid; I just don’t know how likely it is to occur.

When I first read the part of the article where you talked about replacing gender-specific pronouns with words like “folks,” “peeps,” “homies,” and “fam,” I thought this was a good idea. These words are already used in this context when talking to others. For example, some people call their friend their “homie.” But the more I thought about it, the more I realized that it wouldn’t work to call everyone by those names. Calling friends “peeps” or “homies” seems natural and

normal, but I don’t know how practical these names would be when talking to someone professionally or to someone you are trying to treat with respect. For example, I wouldn’t feel comfortable saying to a teacher, “Hello, homie!”, and I don’t know how appropriate it would be for adults to call their bosses “peeps” or “fam.” Also, what about Mr., Miss, Mrs. and Ms.? Should all gender-specific pronouns be replaced with nongender-identifying pronouns like “ze” and “emself”?

Although it sounds like I am opposed to the idea of using “they,” I believe “they” could be the solution to the language issue for people who do not identify as male or female. It would help decrease the misgendering of genderfluid people. Maybe everyone could call people by nongender-associated names. I think the best answer to this problem would be to eliminate gender-specific language all together, but that is highly unlikely to happen. Maybe new words could be invented to avoid these gender barriers, but they might take a long time to integrate into our language.

As I continued to think about “they” replacing gender-specific pronouns, I started to notice that I frequently use “they” when talking about a specific person. For example, if I am asking a friend about what another person likes, I would say, “What do they like?” instead of, “What does she or he like?” When I think about it that way, this shift in language doesn’t seem so unattainable.

Thank you for writing the YES! Magazine article, “‘They’ and the

Emotional Weight of Words.” Since I have read your article, I have been more aware of the language I use. I believe that there does need to be a change in the language we use so no one has to deal with the burden of being called the wrong pronoun. I wish all people could be conscious of what pronoun they use when talking to or about someone. After all, there are many things people cannot control in their lives, but their gender pronoun should not be one.

From,

Alex

The *Jintas* of Conservative Korean Culture

By Joanne Yang, grade 8

Dear Cole,

Frankly, when I first read your article, I had no context to understand it at all. The issue of language pronouns is completely alien to me, since there are no actual words in Korean to describe people in the LGBTQ+ community, only romanized versions of them which are seldom—in fact, almost never—used. Even though I was sympathetic towards LGBTQ+ causes, your article made me realize how little I understood about their particular dilemmas and the negative effects of society forcing them into limiting categories. In Korea, all the issues you have addressed are latent, neglected, and invisible in the eyes of many people, including mine.

Your article was a wake-up call for me that the LGBTQ+ movement for full acceptance is almost nonexistent in Korea. I became disheartened when I realized how far Korea lags behind other nations in supporting LGBTQ+ issues. As one of the most Confucian societies in the world, we adhere strictly to gender norms. Quite simply, women are expected to be feminine and men are expected to be masculine. In fact, the only Korean cultural event that celebrates LGBTQ+ acceptance is called the Korea Queer Culture Festival. I had never heard of it before reading your article. I felt even more sympathy towards Korean LGBTQ+ people when I learned that people involved in the festival wear masks to hide their identities.

I am ashamed to say that it would be almost inconceivable for a single Korean person I know to identify as transgender because it would trigger so much fear and embarrassment. Even if someone were to come out openly as gay, he or she would be ridiculed with the common Korean slang *jinta*. This word is used to mock or marginalize people as different, peculiar, and uncommon, and it has devastating power in Korean culture. The mere mention of being labeled *jinta* can completely—and permanently—ostracize you from society.

I grasped the true power of this word in high school when my friend was shunned for being too “masculine.” She is still known as the ultimate *jinta* simply because she preferred soccer over gossiping and baggy jeans over skirts. As soon as one person characterized her as a *jinta*, it was as if there was a tacit and invisible agreement among all students not to interact with her, lest they be categorized as a *jinta* as well. This may seem like an innocuous example of high school bullying, but it is a reflection of a deeply entrenched part of our culture that has an almost Orwellian kind of control over what types of individual behavior and actions are acceptable in Korean society.

All this exemplifies the primary reason why people choose to conform in Korea and emphasizes the impact even one word can have on what people think of themselves. If one word can

change how people think and feel about their identity, then we should enlarge the scope of them so that we are more inclusive.

Reading your article opened my eyes and inspired me to learn more about LGBTQ+ people and bring awareness to this cultural cause in Korea. It even motivated me to look at myself differently. Our identities do not always fit in a narrow “gendered box” as you mention in your article, and people like my friend should not have to face discrimination because of this.

Language is constantly evolving and plays a large role in defining us and how we perceive each other. When gender pronouns are too limited, we unnecessarily limit ourselves and fail to see how truly nuanced and malleable we actually are. The strict options of “she” or “he” prevent us from understanding and connecting with each other on a deeper level. In society, and especially in conservative countries like Korea, we must broaden our language to include more gender pronouns to allow people to define themselves however they like. Words should never be allowed to limit who we are.

Sincerely,

Joanne

Language is a Many-Gendered Thing

By Ella Martinez, grade 9

Dear Cole,

As someone who has recently started asking people in my life to refer to me using the pronouns “they/them/theirs,” I was interested in your views on language in the YES! Magazine article “‘They’ and the Emotional Weight of Words,” particularly your idea that there’s more to it than language.

I identify as genderfluid. Some days I feel female, other days I feel male, and there are days where I’m entirely apathetic about gender. When people ask why, the conversation can start to get confusing. Older people especially seem to rely on gender pronouns to provide information, but that can be problematic if I don’t want to be labeled. The expanding language regarding gender is a great movement towards self-expression; however, I have felt this shift create a divide.

When I came out to my grandmother as queer, she didn’t understand what I meant. English isn’t even her first language: she and my father came to New England from Puerto Rico in 1971. I had never stopped to consider that she wouldn’t be able to understand what I was trying to communicate based solely on the grammar. In Spanish pronouns are binary. Even the pronouns for “they” have feminine forms (ellas) and masculine forms (ellos). Ella, my name, is often mistaken for the Spanish pronoun “she,” as well. If I were to tell my grandmother that I’m not a girl, and I’m not a boy—that I’m not a she or a he—she would simply not understand. To her I am Ella (and ella).

Although I know that there is a large LGBTQIA+ community back in Puerto Rico, it only recently started emerging and gaining some attention. My grandmother left the country long before it developed, so she has no foundation for discussing these issues. Her lack of knowledge and understanding is what holds me back from talking about queer issues, so I feel even more separate from her. I want to communicate effectively because I love her, and I want her to understand, but it’s just too complex to explain. I came out to her as a lesbian last year. Changing my sexuality and gender now would only confuse her further.

I also feel a divide between my parents and me. They tread very lightly on topics surrounding my identity and sometimes hesitate to ask questions. When they do, I am often unable to give them solid answers for many reasons: because of the fluidity of gender and sexuality, because of my questioning of traditional gender roles, and because of their ignorance about the complex terminology queer people use to describe themselves.

Normally, in parent-child relationships, parents give children advice and information based on their own experiences. In my family, though, the situation is switched: my parents don’t have any experiences with the community I’m a part of, so I find myself being the “parent,” trying to help them navigate my world. And, since none of my own labels are concrete—I am only 15, after all—I hesitate to tell my parents what I am.

I've called myself many different things: bisexual, queer, lesbian, demigirl, genderqueer, and genderfluid. I've chosen genderfluid instead of genderqueer or nonbinary, because I feel like it gives me room to explore, room to grow. I've had to be clear that I reserve the right to change as I discover new things about myself. This fluidity is also something my parents really don't understand. They see labels as lifelong descriptions and view gender and sexuality in binaries (male and female, straight and gay). They try hard to learn, but they were born in a different time, raised in a different way. I actually chose "they/them/theirs" as my preferred pronoun instead of "xe/xem/xyr/s" because these words are known by all English speakers. I figured that it would be easier for them to transition using words they already know.

New languages surrounding gender can be freeing for some and confusing for others. What I can do as a queer young person is use this language, preach the importance of pronouns, and teach the older people in my life about the new concepts of gender and how they connect with words. I hope that as new generations grow into adults, the modern way of speaking and queer culture will become more mainstream and that we'll be able to achieve a society where gender is asked not assumed and where correct pronouns are a priority.

Sincerely,

Ella Martinez

The Thoughts and Struggle of a Two Spirit

By Toby Greybear, grade 9

Dear Cole,

I have never felt more alone in the world than when I was thirteen years old and questioning my gender.

From a young age, gender roles were unrelentingly reinforced on me. I have a twin brother, so that meant he wore blue, and I wore pink. He was the boy, I was the girl — no questions. From early on in my life, if normal didn't feel normal, the repetition would remind me.

Finally, at thirteen years old, I questioned how I felt about gender. I already knew my sexuality—I was pansexual, and I accepted it—but I questioned how I felt about pronouns. I noticed how odd it is that society forces dresses and bows on girls as soon as they are born and encourages sharp jaw lines and unrestrained anger from boys. I was caught in this complex limbo, struggling between rejecting my feelings and embracing a fuller understanding and acceptance of who I was. Regardless of how I felt inside, I was still addressed as “she” and “her.” In that vulnerable state, the negative mindset I had towards those pronouns amplified.

And I was so, so angry. I was angry I had to acknowledge my gender dysphoria, and angry I let myself linger in the seemingly perpetual space of unknowing. I kept returning to society's assumption: You were born a girl, so you should accept being called “she/her.” This temporary conclusion always lulled my mind and quieted my thoughts to a removed and dull white noise. All I

ever wanted to say was, “I don't know.” I didn't know who I was, and sometimes, I still don't. But not knowing isn't an acceptable answer for society.

I could barely comprehend my gender, but when people would ask me about it, I would reply with what I had rehearsed many, many times: “I'm a girl.” I would lie. Because if there was anything I was sure about, it was that I did not identify as a girl in any sense of the word. I didn't identify as anything. I was just me.

In my culture, people who do not fit within the gender binary are called “Two Spirit.” My people, the Dakota and Lakota, acknowledge that people do not always fit within norms and boundaries, and that is okay—even sacred. They were seen as people who had both female and male souls, and could fulfill both roles. As a Native American, I wish I had known about this term sooner in my life. I never grew up with my culture's influence, so I was ignorant of the word until I moved to a reservation, where I looked more deeply into spiritual practices. I wish I had willingly embraced my culture earlier. Instead, by rejecting any semblance of Native culture, I let myself be acculturated into Eurocentric thinking. If I had spent time exploring my own culture, maybe I would've been okay with myself at age thirteen.

Now, at fifteen years old, I still question my gender. Sometimes people refer to me with the pronouns “they/them,” and I never find myself wanting to correct them. Even if I did ask others

to address me with “he/him,” something I’m still reluctant to do out of fear. There would still be words lingering behind my teeth, way back in my throat, wanting to say, “I also go by ‘they/them.’”

Recently, I met another kid my age who questioned their gender, and went by “they/them.” They asked us to call them Kyle, and I met them on a school trip. Kyle was upbeat, funny, and very friendly. I instantaneously felt a surge of relief and familiarity. It was my first time meeting them, but they immediately understood. They knew how I felt: the curiosity and the questioning, the discomfort of having to fit within a narrow box, a black and white binary that didn’t need to exist in the first place.

At thirteen years old, I felt alone. My questions were not encouraged, and the concept of not having to go by “him” or “her” was foreign to me.

At fifteen years old, I embrace myself. My curiosity is welcomed. I am transgender and I accept it. I do not want to follow society’s standards of normal because they are not my standards, my Dakota and Lakota Two-Spirit standards. And that is okay.

Best,
Toby

The Right to be a Little Bit Rude

By Madeleine Wise, grade 9

Dear Cole,

I admire your dedication to spreading knowledge about the sensitive subject of gender. In your article “‘They’ and the Emotional Weight of Words,” I agree with what you said about politely correcting people instead of “checking” them, but I feel like this isn’t as easy as you make it seem.

You see, most people are raised with an aversion to correcting others. They tend to feel that it’s not their place to call someone out, or even to gently remind them of a mistake they made, especially when talking with adults or superiors. This is a norm that mostly goes unquestioned, but it can create barriers, especially for people who feel like they are asking for too much in the first place. This socialized politeness is a problem for people who use the pronouns “they/ them” and have self-esteem issues.

I remember when several friends of mine came out to me as nonbinary. They all said something along the lines of: “I prefer “they/them” pronouns, but my old pronouns are fine.” The majority of them didn’t really mean it; however, they were afraid that I would find it rude if they were more assertive. This hesitancy causes a miscommunication. Friends or family members may misunderstand the importance of using the proper pronouns and get away with misgendering because “enbies” (a slang term for nonbinary people) don’t feel like they have the right to interject.

Unfortunately, people are always

going to misgender others—it would be unrealistic to think otherwise. Like you said, no one can expect people to know their pronouns at first glance. What we need to do is create an environment in which nonbinary people (all trans people, really) feel like they have the right to correct others when they do get misgendered—and raise a generation that feels comfortable asking someone’s pronouns before assuming. This would require a higher level of respect and better education on topics like gender and identity, but these are things everybody can help work towards in one way or another.

Sometimes, we need to step up in someone’s defense when fighting for their preferred pronouns becomes too much. One of my friends, an enby by the name of Sage, finds it extremely exhausting to explain their identity to new people all the time. So my friends and I are at their beck and call. At a recent party with plenty of their more distant relatives, we formed the “Sage Protection Squad.” One of us was with Sage at all times, so that if anyone was out of the loop, we could fill them in. Alternatively, if anyone refused to get in the loop, we could come at them with a croquet mallet of grammar (I’m only slightly kidding).

Of course, the best teachers on this subject are nonbinary people themselves. If we shout over them, we’re defeating the purpose entirely. What we should be doing is (red) carpeting the runway to the stage so our enby friends can take

the mic. An ally's job is to give enby friends whatever they need in order to stay strong through adversity. We have to work together to create the world we want to live in. No one can do it on their own.

Sincerely,
Madeleine Wise

Existing Openly is Half the Battle

By Avery Hunt, university

Dear Cole,

I used the pronoun “she” throughout high school—the same one my parents have been using for me since I was born. Yes, I was in a liberal and open-minded town, one that allowed me to change my name on the school roster months before my legal name change went through. But somehow, switching to “they/them” pronouns felt like a step too far. It wouldn’t be safe, and a large part of me was afraid of that. When I accepted my university’s offer of admission, there was a little box that said “preferred pronouns.” I closed the tab and ignored it for two days, unsure of what to write. I didn’t want to be stuck with pronouns that I didn’t identify with, but my university was in the South, notorious for being unaccepting of people who don’t fit its norms. I was still afraid. In the end, I took a leap and picked what made me comfortable: “they/them.”

You talked about this leap and the concept that we as gender-nonconforming people have to come to peace with “our authentic selves.” I like that you identified it as a process, as something that would “eventually” happen over time. I think people are so often caught up in trying to come to terms with the new terminology that they forget the language is new to the people using it as well. For almost everyone I’ve met at college, I’m the first person they’ve ever interacted with who uses the pronouns “they/them.” I’ve accepted my role as the token nonbinary person, and I’ve grown accustomed to explaining my

gender to people who haven’t had the opportunity to learn about it in-depth. But I’m still learning about it myself.

For the first month of college, my friends reminded faculty—more often than I did—to call me “they,” not “she.” I was used to hearing “she,” so nothing sounded wrong to me when my professors addressed me by the feminine pronoun. It is only in the last two months or so that being called “she” has started sounding weird to me, much in the same way that incorrect grammar sounds strange to native speakers of a language. It takes me a minute to identify why it feels wrong, but I am immediately certain that it is.

This is why patience is such an important part of being the default teacher in a community. Truly, as you remark, we must have “no expectation” of people knowing our preferred pronouns. Visible nonbinary and trans people are at the forefront of a new world, and we’re paving the roads as we’re walking them. To “demand to be seen” in this current age is to accept that we will always be teaching people terminology and complex topics of gender and sexuality.

While Navajo and Jewish cultures, along with others, have understood for centuries that there are more than two genders, modern America still struggles to figure out what bathroom I should be allowed to use—never mind how many bathrooms there should be and with what labels. I will always be explaining, and I will always be fighting for the

acceptance that so many other people take for granted. Being visible in modern America is a form of activism in and of itself. When we're fighting to prove our right to exist as we are, existing openly is half of the battle.

I'm frequently uncomfortable writing openly about this because I sound like a martyr. I'm not self-sacrificing; I am who I need to be, and I feel like you understand that. I exist and I fight and I teach so that the next person at my university who makes the decision to choose the pronoun "they/them" on their acceptance letter will have less of a struggle. I do this so that they will have at least one professor or fellow student who, when faced with their pronouns, will accept them without asking questions. So that they may encounter people who normalize their existence. So that there will hopefully be one less person to whom they have to explain the concept of the gender spectrum, and where they fit in. I'm here with you to do my part to "challenge old language" and concepts.

I have to be.

Regards,

Avery Hunt