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WGSS Queer Theories and Politics: Blog Post

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Cassidy Vogel (she/they)

WGSS Queer Theories and Politics.

Political education is the practice of using knowledge for action, whether its serving and educating the community or taking personal action. This is central Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, but in Dr. Klinker's Queer Theories and Politics (WGSS 374) students were able to engage in political education beyond the class. The class was often held in the Watkin's Art Gallery while it was hosting the show, *On the Inside: A Group Show of Currently Incarcerated LGBTQ+ Artists*, whether it was for classwork, enjoyment, and/or education.

At the beginning of semester, the class read an article by Stephen Wilson titled [How People on the Outside Can Support the Political Work of People on the Inside](#). I would like to three points from this article to highlight several ways the class enacted this praxis.

“Organize and struggle with us, but allow us to be the authorities on our own experiences.”

Roughly a month before Monica Cosby, a mother, grandmother, activist, and organizer who was formerly incarcerated for twenty years, spoke at Winona State for Women's History Month, the Queer Theories and Politics class studied her work, analyzing the theory she set forth. Then, on the day of the presentation the class got to meet her and during this time the class built the presentation through conversation. Cosby identified what she wanted to speak about, and through conversation with her the class began to fill in the presentation with her ideas and words. To be able to engage in a conversation with an activist like Monica Cosby, a person whose words I've studied and discussed, to be able to organize with her was one of the most, if not the most, unique educational experiences I have ever had.



Figure 1: Monica Cosby

“Don't speak for us. We can speak. When we cannot, due to repression or threats from prison officials, use your freedom and privilege to amplify our voices and advance our issues.”

The class organized two screenings a month apart for Winona State students, faculty, and community members. The first screening was *Free Cece!* a documentary centered around the story of CeCe



Figure 2: Free CeCe! Poster

McDonald, an African American transwoman, who acting in self-defense was pressured to accept a plea bargain for second degree manslaughter. The film shows the discriminatory treatment CeCe received from the criminal justice system and how she rose from it when reentering the world. Students then organized a few questions for the audience before moving the group to the On the Inside Exhibit.

The second film was *The Gentleman Bank Robber*, a documentary on Rita Bo Brown a working-class butch who got her name from politely demanding funds from the bank tellers. The film shows a historically retelling of her life through interviews with herself, as well as her friends. Students made posters for both films emailing them to faculty and student clubs, as well as plastering them around campus with the sole goal to amplify both CeCe McDonald and Rita Bo Brown voices and stories on campus.

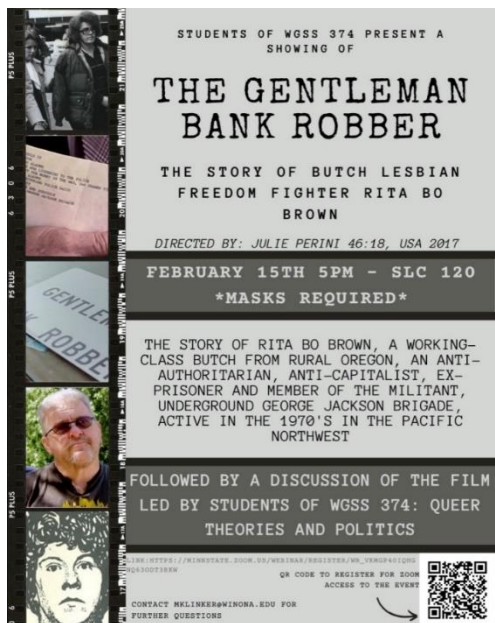


Figure 3: The Gentleman Bank Robber Poster

"Be accomplices. Put yourselves out there for us. Attend rallies and speak out against the PIC. Organize call-ins to prisons. Show up at courthouses. Disrupt. Disrupt. Disrupt the PIC."

For students to become accomplices to incarcerated individuals we worked with the LGBT Books to Prisoners organization in Madison, Wisconsin to send books to incarcerated LGBTQ + people. To do this the class partnered with Chapter 2 books, a local downtown bookstore in Winona, who allowed us to use a window display in their shop as well as collect books. The class in preparation for this worked together to compile information from LGBT Books to Prisoners, Black and Pink studies, and prior readings to create political education that would be displayed in the window.

Of this action, my peers stated:

"Books to prisoners is an extremely important...First, receiving mail sends a message to those on the inside that they are cared about and being seen by others. This helps with isolation, which can have a big impact on mental health. It also signals to the other people inside, including the guards, that the person who received mail is cared for by people on the outside. This solidarity offers a level of social protection while in prison. The other important thing is the actual books that are sent in. Books can be an important part of life, from offer education to providing a place for escapism. This is especially



Image 4: Books to Prisoners Display 1

important in prison, where it is harder to access books of your choosing. When you send a book in, it may go to one person, but often times it will be passed around between people to read (as Monica Cosby taught us). The written word is so powerful, and it is one way that we have to connect with people on the inside” (Rae Peter).

To conclude, I believe that praxis, the idea of taking a text, a piece with dense theory, then applying it to the community and your own life is tremendously important. As teaching students’ different methods of organizing and ways to be impactful in class has the potential to spread to their major/s, other minors, student clubs, and their life after college. Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality studies program is much more than a grade on a transcript, as a fellow student stated:

“My Women, Gender and Sexuality Studies courses have strengthened my passion even more for my major of legal studies and inspired me to pursue a career in

advocacy. Many of the things I'm learning in my classes for my WGSS minor are applicable to law and society. Through examining theory and history of feminists I'm able to see how the law impacts the community as a whole and pushes certain groups to the margins of society. From the feminist lens I have developed through my courses I am able to see how the law is impacting our communities and is intersectional linked to many chain effects including sexual and domestic violence. My favorite part of my experience is that through WGSS I have learned how not only how to be an active listener for those who suffer from violence but most importantly center the voices of victims and survivors of violence within society and let them know their voice heard” (Cassidy Daniel).