

Journal of Critical Thought and Praxis

ISSN: 2325-1204. Journal homepage: <https://www.iastatedigitalpress.com/jctp/>

Volume 8, Issue 2, 2019, Article 2, <https://doi.org/10.31274/jctp.8203>

An Interview with Dr. Z Nicolazzo

Z Nicolazzo, *University of Arizona*

Alexia Angton, Iowa State University

Paul S. Hengesteg, Iowa State University



This piece has been selected by the JCTP Editorial Board as the *Dr. Isaac Gottesman Featured Contribution to Critical Thought and Praxis*. Awarded to Dr. Z Nicolazzo.

Abstract

The Journal of Critical Thought and Praxis has traditionally published interviews with individuals who have strong connections to our special issue topics. We believe that interviews are important ways to contribute to the conversation surrounding critical issues in social justice. This interview features Dr. Z Nicolazzo, whose recent visit to Iowa State University offered the opportunity for the editorial team to discuss her research and interests in Trans* Studies. This interview took place on the day that the Supreme Court of the United States began their debates on trans rights in the work place, which is mentioned and discussed in the interview.

Recommended Citation

Nicolazzo, Z., Angton, A., & Hengesteg, P.S. (2019). An Interview with Dr. Z Nicolazzo. *Journal of Critical Thought and Praxis*, 8 (2), 1-8. <https://doi.org/10.31274/jctp.8203>

Copyright and Open Access

© 2019 Z Nicolazzo, Alexia Angton, & Paul S. Hengesteg



This article is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial \(CC BY-NC\) 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/), which permits any sharing and adaptation of the article, as long as the original author(s) and source are credited and the article is used for non-commercial purposes.

An Interview with Dr. Z Nicolazzo

Z Nicolazzo

Assistant Professor, Trans Studies in Education, Center for the Study of Higher Education, University of Arizona*

Alexia Angton and Paul S. Hengesteg

*Editorial Board, Journal of Critical Thought and Praxis
Iowa State University*

The Journal of Critical Thought and Praxis has traditionally published interviews with individuals who have strong connections to our special issue topics. We believe that interviews are important ways to contribute to the conversation surrounding critical issues in social justice. This interview features Dr. Z Nicolazzo, whose recent visit to Iowa State University offered the opportunity for the editorial team to discuss her research and interests in Trans Studies. This interview took place on the day that the Supreme Court of the United States began their debates on trans rights in the work place, which is mentioned and discussed in the interview.*

Q. Would you share with our readers kind of an overview of where your research has been and kind of where you would like for it to go?

There's this moment in time, I think, for faculty members where they submit their stuff [for promotion and tenure] and then maybe like right after they hear back where we kind of have this like what does it all mean, where's my work going kind of moment, right? We've built this body of scholarship to get to promotion and tenure and then after it's like, well, what do I want to do next? I feel like I'm at that particular moment, the question you're asking.

My work broadly has focused on tracing discourses of gender in higher education spaces. I often tell people that I actually see myself as a gender scholar who happens to use higher education as kind of the container of my research. I think I'm a little bit of an odd duck in that respect. I don't really think about myself as a higher education scholar, not primarily I guess or first, but that I happen to be in higher education and think about that as kind of the site for the gender research that I do. I'm thinking about these discourses as broader cultural discourses that mediate people's life chances and experiences in education with a primary focus on transgender students, but also thinking about [the work] I've done with trans faculty, as well as ways of knowing and doing research.

In terms of where my work is heading, I've been trying to think a little bit about cultural change. One of the things that we know about cultural change is that it is pretty deeply embedded and ingrained in everything that we do and any change that happens is slow to take root. So when I think about my book and when I think about my previous work, I feel like I have been able to focus on particular attitudes and behaviors that go along with these gender discourses in educational spaces. I can point to attitudes and behaviors that reify or help kind of undermine

these discourses. However, it's not really about just getting people to change their actions, right? That sometimes doesn't change the way that we think about gender. It doesn't change our framework. So I've been trying to kind of think about my future scholarship as almost tracing those attitudes and behaviors back a little bit and not trying to find like an ultimate unifying kind of theory or grounding space. Rather, thinking about where those attitudes and behaviors come from. I've become really interested in affect theory lately and thinking about how affect and emotionality give rise to various different attitudes and behaviors. So we're thinking quite literally about things like panic, fear, anxiety, and desire and how these things might give rise to the various different ways that gender discourses operate and come to exist in higher education spaces. That's one thing that I'm looking at. I'm starting to collect data for a project that I'm talking about as the Higher Education Affect Project, where I'm trying to do what I'm talking about as an ethnography of feeling in education. Also, I'm doing some work like I talked about last night in my lecture on campus focusing on digital spaces and thinking about how trans students have already been using online spaces to think about future possible selves, as well as community building. I think that's where my work is kind of heading.

Q. I'd like to follow up on that. One of the things that you mentioned last night in your lecture was this notion of underworlds and it being, although hidden, safe because what is visual or present, may not be, and I just find that very fascinating. What else would you add to that and why is that capturing you?

So this idea of underworld and Juliana Huxtable talk about is really powerful especially given the modernist paradigm that education seems really rooted in. I think a lot about how, because we're in a modernist framework, the notion of visibility is very much lauded and focused on. No pun intended. There's a real drive and desire to create visible structures like LGBT centers or to think about having more queer and trans people through hiring practices as signs of progress, right? There's this ultimate progress narrative that's really framed through notions of visibility and tangible things that we can hold on to or point to.

In the last session that I was just in, we were talking about the desire of some states and governments to track bodies. This idea about putting gender and sexuality markers on applications so that we can track how many queer and trans students enter our university and if they're ultimately successful becomes another tangible thing that's visible. While that may be efficacious in some senses, having centers is important, having queer and trans faculty and staff is important, it also is not the sole indicator of how we come to think about or know ourselves as queer and trans people. In fact, if we're only focused on visibility then we're creating a really white, upwardly, mobile, able-bodied narrative about what queer and trans-ness looks like. We actually know from the data, that queer and trans students of color by and large are not using LGBTQ centers even when they exist on campuses at the same rates as our white queer and trans students. So this connection with Black studies and trans studies has really been thinking a lot about the different ways that we can think about invisibility as providing possibility for how we can live queer and trans lives. I'm thinking a lot about things like online platforms, things like avatar creation sites like the emoji, things like YouTube, Tumblr, Facebook, although youth are not using Facebook as much anymore, but they're still accessing Facebook groups, all the way to thinking about like popular shows with trans people and how literally light and dark operate in those spaces.

Q. How does your scholarship influence your activism and vice versa? Like how are these things interconnected for you? Not only how, but why are they interconnected for you?

The first thing that popped into my mind when you were asking that question is...I think it's a Howard Zinn quote...*You can't stay neutral on a moving train, right, and especially as we're moving closer and closer to.* Sundown tonight is the start of Yom Kippur, which is the Day of Atonement for the High Holidays for Jews and I'm thinking a lot over the last 10 days. It starts with Rosh Hashanah, ends with Yom Kippur, the High Holy Days and I've been thinking a lot over the last 10 days about the fact that our world is literally on fire right now, right?

I mean [that] figuratively and environmentally and there's not an option to remain neutral. In fact, to suggest that one is neutral is a political choice that is marking you as not neutral. I think that when I wake up every day, I might not think about it consciously, but I realize that I, and everyone else, have a choice to make about what we do with the agency and the power that we have. I think I was told, not as much, but I was told either verbally or tacitly when I was coming up through the ranks and when I started my first tenure track job that I really shouldn't create too many waves until I got tenure. The tenure was like this golden ticket and then once he got that golden ticket, you could do all sorts of different things. Well, we probably all know in this conversation that based on various different marginalized identities that we have that that golden ticket is never going to save us. I knew pretty quickly that I ought not wait and I also knew that the being told to wait was itself a way to kind of derail my scholarship and work that desperately needed to happen. So, I think in that sense, I try to take stock of what talents I think I have and use them to shape various different kinds of public and academic conversations. We all know that the academy is not nearly the liberal place that many people want to suggest that it is or want to desire to think that it is.

There's lots of work that needs to happen in higher education spaces and education spaces in general and I know that one of my talents is... I'm not necessarily the best in terms of like chanting and being on the front lines, but I do know that I have some gifts around writing. I can write fairly well and fairly fast and so I've tried to move into more public scholarship these days and trying to think about how I can reach different, broader audiences that are not behind paywalls.

I think about that with some of my activism and my public scholarship work. I think about how I'm like when I come to do visits like this on campuses, how I can be good company with people who are already doing good work on that campus. So I usually like to have conversations about: What kinds of things are happening, what kind of conversations are you having, and how can I act literally as the person that you can blame because I leave campus. The people who stay here can say, "well, this person is apparently the national expert and this is what she said we should focus on, so, gosh, I mean, we probably should focus on that, right?" So, people can blame me rather than feel like they need to put themselves in very precarious positions, especially staff members who don't have the privilege of academic freedom or tenure. Those are some of the ways that I'm trying to think about using power to create more equitable spaces, thinking about activism with and beyond academic and scholarly communities. Also, thinking about what is it that the populations that I want to be in community with are needing around research and work and I need to do a better job of that. I need to get more invested and embedded in the Tucson

community to find out what's going on with Tucson youth. I'm very fortunate to live in a community where we have a pretty vibrant queer and trans youth community. I need to do a little bit better getting in touch with that community and ask: "How can I use the various different positions that I have; the titles that I have; the access that I have to different resources to be able to enhance life chances for you folk?" That's hopefully where I see myself going in the next year or two.

Q. And speaking of Tucson, you've been there, what, a year now?

This is my second year back in Tucson. I worked on campus as an educational administrator for four years, left and got my Ph.D. and my first tenure-track position, and then came back at the start of last year. This is, in total, this is year six for me.

Q. You mentioned earlier that you think of yourself as a gender scholar and that higher education is your container. I think is a very fascinating way to think about that. With that in mind, what do you think the most pressing social justice issues and concerns are facing higher education now and in the coming years? If you want to expand that to P-20 education, you certainly can.

That's a really good question. One of the things that I find to be the most pressing social justice issue writ large, I'll start there, is literally what's happening with the fucking climate, right? I've been really captivated by the work that Naomi Klein is doing right now. I think that she's one of the best investigative journalists that is doing work right now and what she's doing around the climate and climate barbarism is I think intensely important.

I think the work of youth activists around climate change is also super important. Certainly Greta Thunberg is the most visible and notable. We can think about how whiteness operates to create her as that person, but I think that becomes, for me, this very central thing that we need to be thinking about. I don't know really how to do it as someone who's not a hard scientist because that's *literally* not my area and also if we don't have a world then almost everything else kind of melts away. No pun intended.

That said, I think one of the most pressing things in schooling climates is this ongoing pressed around being in a post-truth era and being really saturated in these epistemologies of ignorance that allow people to negate our current conditions and negate the fact that we are literally 11 years away from disaster. It's intensely scary to me to realize that truth almost doesn't matter anymore in various different ways and that when we think about being in a post-truth era that people are actually going out and seeking, reporting whether it's true or not. It just backs up their own opinions rather than engaging in any kind of critical reflection and thought and I know that's probably not the answer that people would assume that I would say, but if facts ceased to exist and empirical evidence ceases to matter, then I think the work that we do as scholars really needs to shift and change, right? We can almost no longer say, "Well, here's the evidence and so we should just focus on the evidence." The claim needs to become different. We still need to do these studies, but the way that we talk about and articulate this work needs to fundamentally change. So, that's one of the things that again I'm still trying to get a handle on it, but the reality

of this post-truth era and the reality of people's literal insistence on ignorance as a starting point for pushing certain agendas seems incredibly pressing to me right now.

Q. So this next question dovetails to that and how do you see emerging scholars, whether that's doctoral students like us or new faculty who are in year 1,2,3 of their role, how do you see their roles, their positionalities as either supporting and combating the issues that you see or reifying those issues in problematic ways?

I think one of the things that we need to really let go of in the academy is the notion of objectivity and capital T truths and this is not a type of research kind of conversation, right? It's not me saying, oh, quantitative research is bad, don't do it because there are plenty of folks who do really critically infused and focused quantitative research. I think that when we hold on to objectivity or when we say that certain things aren't "good enough" because they're "biased" then that becomes really shaky ground for forward movement. I think that we need to recognize that perspectives are all over the place and that, as I was talking about last night, that the field of education is saturated with oppressive ideologies and cultural histories. It's not about finding an ultimate truth that somehow supersedes these notions of privilege power and oppression, but that we're literally embedded in and dealing with ongoing realities of oppressive systems and structures and that we probably need to be doing more work that's focused on our various different positionalities and how those are mediated by these broader systems. I think I want to believe that, and this is at least been a case for me and my experiences, doc students and candidates by and large continue to push me to do better and deeper and more thoughtful work, both in terms of scholarship as well as in terms of teaching. You're [doctoral students] coming off of this kind of resurgence of student activism and so you're quite literally demanding certain things of us as tenure-track faculty, which I think are really important. You're helping us change curricula, you're helping us change and understand new research methodologies, and you're helping us understand different ways of thinking and being in the world that I think are desperately required because we can't keep on looking at the same problems and using the same tools to think that we can solve those problems, right? We need more work around indigenous ways of knowing and methodologies. We need more work around like the special journal or the special issue that you folks are creating about issues of queering the economy because it's those different frameworks that will actually help us come to various different imagined futures and dreamed realities that could help shape things differently.

Q. So how do you see the diversity discourse, queering education, how's that relationship come together for you, and how do you think we can call people in on that, whether they be, you know, adamantly opposed or just simply unaware?

So, we think about notions of queering, we're really thinking about destabilizing normalized understandings of self and others, right?

Certainly thinking about destabilizing normative notions around gender and sexuality, but also we can think about normative and monolithic understandings of race and racialization able bodied-ness. All of these different kinds of constructs and one of the other things that we can destabilize is this notion of diversity and what diversity has come to mean or ought to mean. Whenever I think about diversity and diversity discourse, my mind goes immediately to Sara

Ahmed's work and *On Being Included* and I think about this fact that diversity, almost kind of what I was talking about last night, that diversity, similar to gender, can mean both everything and nothing, right? There are ways that certain terms have been created as so widely used that they become empty and hollow. We could, and should, very much take some time to mourn the loss of some of these terms also recognize that that provides a certain opportunity to imbue these terms with various different ways of thinking.

So, if diversity is hollow, but wasn't always then it means that we might be able to fill diversity with different kinds of things, right? So how is it that we can actually use something like a queering education special issues to fill the void of what diversity should mean or could mean? How is it that we can think about diversity beyond let's say a black-white binary as it's usually constructed on college campuses? How is it that we can think about race and racialization as always already attached to gender when we think about diversity? I need to give credit where credit is due, one of my former students, Romeo Jackson, who now works at the University of Las Vegas, as they once said in one of my classes, if we're not talking about race then we're actually not talking about gender either. These ideas and these structures are actually intimately interwoven. I think that there's opportunity and hope for diversity or inclusion or equity or social justice or whatever *term de jure* people might want to use.

Whatever gains some sort of resonance with folx, as long as we're able to put things back into that term rather than, as Ahmed talks about it, just kind of moving it up in statements because that's what we need to do, right? It's not necessarily about this "best practice" of having the word diversity in a course title or a statement or something like that. It's about like what are these terms actually do. How do we make these terms, and ideas, performative in nature and some of this work that we're all doing all adds to that. Special issues of journals, ways of thinking about online existence, recognizing underworlding, going back and reclaiming histories and realizing that the current queer movement that's currently in the Supreme Court today was built on the backs and with the hands of trans Latinas and black trans women. We can think about the legacy of Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson that actually gave us the platform for Chase Strangio and Laverne Cox to be in the Supreme Court today trying the cases they're trying. I feel like that's the work of maybe doing some reclamation or filling diversity with something more important rather than just allowing it to be an empty signifier.

Q. I think as you're talking about diversity and kind of how it's shifted and gone away maybe from some of the roots, it really made me think about intersectionality as a term, as a theory, as methodology, and how it's kind of gone through this same thing of, you know, it was grounded in, you know, black feminist thought and then now it's kind of moved to be buzzwording, right? And I think in education there seems to be this pattern of terms that had meaning and were good kind of going through this shift of, oh, certain people latched on to it and made it what they wanted it to be and now it's kind of lost some of its power, unfortunately.

You know, especially when we think about intersectionality, I know that Lori Paton Davis and Jessica Harris just put out a really fantastic article that talks about how intersectionality is being used and misused in educational research, and I think their call to reclaim that term is really important. I'm trying to kind of pair that with Jennifer Nash's latest book, *Black Feminism*

Reimagined. In that book, she uses this notion of intimacies to think about how can we pair the notion of intersectionality with various other notions and concepts that are really important in our work. She has one chapter in her book where she talks about how the National Women's Studies Association shifted from a focus on intersectionality to transnational feminisms and replaced one with the other. Now, she is making this argument in this chapter in her book that maybe we can think about intimate relationships between concepts so that we can bring them together, rather than just swapping one out for the other.

If we think about this in terms of diversity discourse instead of moving from diversity to equity or equity to inclusion or inclusion to social justice or social justice to whatever the next term is, how can we actually think about building intimacies across various concepts and really across various different disciplines too? I think we become very siloed in our own particular discipline, oftentimes to detrimental effects.

Q. What are maybe some obstacles you faced in attempting to queer education? We know that we have these very long-standing traditions, right, of being stuck in very, Eurocentric, androcentric, and all of the rest of the -isms in terms of being in education, but what are some of the obstacles you faced in attempting to queer education? What is some advice or some hope that you can offer as emerging scholars who want to do this work?

I think the realities of living in an increasingly polarized and highly nationalistic country and world – what’s happening right now is not just a U.S. phenomenon – means that for many of us who exist on the margins or have salient oppressed identities or marginalized identities, experience things on an individual and institutional or systemic level. There are ways that in my previous position I experienced various forms of benign neglect where people just weren't doing any sort of mentoring of me. They weren't checking in with me. They weren't making sure that I had what I need or what I needed until I got another job and signed on the dotted line and then all of a sudden I was a rising star. They were interested in retaining me and all that was framed through a, “oh, you've got this, you're doing fine, just keep on doing whatever you need, we'll just get out of your way,” which I understand in some respects, but also is just really not what was happening. I was still doing loads of service work and I'm still doing all this other stuff, but people just didn't want to be alongside of me based on how trans oppression shows up institutionally.

Other things that I've faced, I mean, certainly I've gotten some really terrible voicemail messages. I've gotten all sorts of things said to me from students in teacher evaluations and even just last night, I went back to my hotel room and had seven different emails from some email server that I don't know and we can't trace that had all sorts of very violent and vitriolic kinds of shit about me and what I should do with myself, that I should kill myself and all these kinds of things. This is, I think, one of the realities that we as scholars might need to face. I hope that we don't but we might need to at certain points in time. For me I think what was brought home to me very clearly last night was, thinking “okay, I'm experiencing this stuff. I'm having some responses to these emails. I feel the need to reach out to someone.”

I'm going to go online, right? I went online, I tweeted about it, and immediately people tweeted back to me and people texted me. Folx asked if I wanted to talk on the phone. I was very aware

and I'm usually aware of this, but I was like really, really, clearly aware of how we build community and how we create family. Especially when we talk about notions of queerness in education, my trans family reached out to me from British Columbia, from California, from Texas, from all over the country to be able to say "what do you need," "how are you," "I'm sorry this is happening," "this is really fucked up," and it wasn't just trans people. It was my sister scholar in Colorado who does work with undocumented youth who is like what the fuck? Who do I need to come for? How are you? That could happen at 10 or 11 o'clock at night and this morning I could wake up and that people would still be saying "hey, I just want to check in on you, what do you need?" That's how I think we get through this stuff, right? We know that these things will happen. We hope that they won't. We know that they likely will and so our best response is, and I said this last night to the queer and trans people in the room and I truly 100% believe this, Cece McDonald makes this point that the state does not want to protect us, but that we protect each other. I think that that is so important when we move into academic spaces. Whether we want to be faculty members or not, we're still in the academy and the academy is still a violent space. Whether we're getting these emails or we're just dealing with benign neglect or being doxed or whatever it is, we need to not look to institutions and we need to not look to the legal apparatus to save us. There might be some legal changes that can help us but at the end of the day, we really need to think about protecting each other and being alongside each other.

I really have been deeply moved in the last 12 to 15 hours thinking about how family shows up 100%, regardless, as best they can, given the reality is that we're all kind of facing together.

Q. [Both interviewers offered apologies and offered words of support. We encourage readers to watch the video for the dialogue]. I think that's important to acknowledge. I think even this notion of education doing this work, being a community effort, and having support, that in and of itself could be considered queering education. A lot of times we like to think about education as its individual, and even for me talking about benign neglect, which so much research has talked about marginalized students, students with marginalized identities experience that all the time. Going from that from an institutional level to the interpersonal level of having community to support you is important that's something to consider when we're talking about how to queer education, as well as a community effort.

100%. I mean, I also think that by and large graduate and doctoral education is still based on mastery models that are highly masculine focused and really are focused on individuals conquering subjects and conquering ideas. So queering education in and of itself might actually look like not being competitive with each other, not operating on scarcity models that, oh my gosh, there are only this many jobs and I need to get mine and so fuck everyone else and I'm just gonna plow forward. You know, we've all heard these really terrible stories about people who have ideas stolen and work stolen and all this kind of stuff. I mean there's no other way to kind of think about it for me but then just to think about how deeply sad it is that we all come to this space to want to do better, especially in education. I joked around earlier about how we don't come to education for money, but still we're really gripped by these notions of scarcity. They're largely framed by ideologies of whiteness and suffer colonialism, you know? So yeah, I do think that queering education means coming together. It means creating different types of familial units and thinking about how we can be with people in wildly different ways.