

## Dr. Luc Beaudoin

University of Denver Department of Gender, Women's, and Sexuality Studies

---

Rachel Jaeger<sup>1</sup> and Nicole Doris<sup>2</sup>, on behalf of the Editorial Board

<sup>1</sup>DUURJ Editor at Large, University of Denver

<sup>2</sup>DUURJ Editor in Chief, University of Denver



### 1 TELL US ABOUT YOUR ACADEMIC JOURNEY AND WHAT LED YOU TO FOCUS ON GENDER STUDIES.

My academic journey has always been language-related. I'm from a background of having lived in at least two or three different languages when I was little. I was fascinated by the way the world was described differently for different people, and how they understood the world differently. I'm simplifying it, but that is something I thought about when I was young. By the time I got to high school, and then later on, university, I wanted to continue trying to figure out how people understand the world. The languages I was going to do were mostly incidental to that. They were based on my schedule and what I could afford in terms of textbooks. Originally I had applied to do German in Montreal at McGill University, but my sister called me up and said I would never get a job that way, so I switched to human genetics, which was more in line with what she wanted me to do. While I thought it was interesting, I had a

relationship, I forgot to do final exams...I had all sorts of issues, and honestly, my heart was not in it. So, I went back to languages.

Languages allowed me to experiment with questions of gender and sexuality. An example is that in German, language classrooms are resolutely heterosexual, or they were in the 1980s, at least. I would refuse to play along, and professors would get angry. They would question what I was doing and why, and that just made me want to do it more. Eventually, by the time I got into Russian, which is my primary area, I was also fascinated by what I considered a culture and society in the Soviet Union that erased its queer citizens. People didn't talk about it, and yet, they were there. When I studied in the Soviet Union for a year, I made some gay friends and got to know people. That framed how I did my research and my teaching through the 90s. Even at DU, I taught a class called Alternative Sexualities in Russian Literature. That's when I started getting involved in the Gender and Women's Studies program. My research, as a result, has always looked at those erased queer voices that didn't get appreciation and didn't have a language to express themselves. They were erased, sometimes violently and physically, from history. They were airbrushed, literally, out of photographs in the Soviet Union. I tried to reclaim who these people were and their importance, which leads directly into gender studies. To approach that topic I had to become familiar with the new area of queer theory at the time and its intersection with language. It speaks to me perfectly. I accumulated languages as I went, so I expanded my field of research.

### 2 WHAT ARE SOME CENTRAL THEMES IN YOUR RECENT RESEARCH, AND HOW DO THEY CONTRIBUTE TO CONVERSATIONS IN GENDER STUDIES?

Right now, my personal research is looking primarily at gay, male, Russian-language exiles—Russophone writers who are exiled from their own country and living abroad. It's accidental that it happened at the same time

as the full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the consolidation of Putin's power, as well as the making illegal of queer expression and queer identities in Russia. Although it's accidental, it certainly has pushed me down this path, because there's no way I'm ever going to go back to the Russian Federation and do research. I can't. My presence is illegal and the work I do is illegal. I have to shift to highlight the voices here, instead. I study primarily Russian, but I also look at writers in Brazil, writers in France, artists, and photographers. The importance of it in gender studies is thinking about how people create a queer identity at the juncture of different cultures, expectations, and languages. For example, if you are a Russian emigrate, a queer exile, and you land in New York City, you're expected to adapt immediately to U.S. gay culture. You might have a good familiarity with it, because you might have seen things on television or on the internet, but it's not your culture. Your own culture, the Russian émigré community in Brighton Beach, doesn't accept you because you're gay. So, you're stuck. You have to reinvent how your identity functions, how you express yourself, how you live, and how you understand yourself between two cultures, neither of which really gets who you are. That is really important because we tend to appreciate the gender studies as having a lot of fluidity and movement, but we forget how much even that movement is defined by language and terminology, defined by the experience of someone in a certain political or social situation.

### **3 WHAT PEDAGOGICAL STRATEGIES DO YOU USE TO FOSTER INCLUSIVE AND CRITICAL DISCUSSIONS AROUND GWSS IN THE CLASSROOM?**

GWSS as a program is already made up of unique individuals who are trying to understand the world and themselves from a new framework. It's a very personal program, in that regard, because it has to do with people's personal experiences, now matter how they identify. To me, the best pedagogical approach to that is to let people speak for themselves. I don't force them into thinking any particular way, even about controversial topics, in the hopes that their own reflection, their own participation in class discussions, allows them to relate and project their experiences onto the topics, people, movements, and ideas that we discuss. Students take away the things that help them better understand themselves and their place in the world. That requires critical thinking, because you need a certain amount of distance to be able to do that, but you also need empathy. You need to be able to relate to people whose backgrounds and cultures may be entirely different from your own experience and see where the commonalities and differences are. It's not just learning a huge amount of facts about how depressing the world is—often we

lean towards that direction, but there is more from it that we can take away. That's where the inclusiveness comes from, automatically. The classes are entirely non-judgmental. Everyone has their own unique thing to contribute, their own experience, their own identity.

### **4 WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO STUDENTS WHO WANT TO PURSUE FUTURE STUDY OR CAREERS IN GWSS?**

That's a really important question. It's trickier to answer to that question right now because of what people might want out of the field. It's not a field that people traditionally think of as stand-alone. It's not something you go into that gives you the opportunity to change the world by itself. It's usually in conjunction with something different—medical school, for instance. My husband and I were watching *Mythic Quest* on Netflix, and there's a character that they gently make fun of, but in a good way. She has a women's studies degree. It made me smile because they're making fun of it, but at the same time, they were trying to show that she is really good at organizing and moving forward because she has a set of critical thinking skills that they don't have. She can call things into question that they don't even think about. That's one of the tricky things about GWSS, is that you don't want your studies to be isolated. The whole point is integration with the world. The whole point is understanding yourself. Typically, it's about applying it as a framework to something different, say, medical school or law. Although, people can go to graduate school and eventually become professors and scholars and affect a whole new generation of people. In that sense, it's very similar to Russian. You don't typically go into a language and then, *poof*, that's your job. You apply it, and it allows you to perceive things differently. I see them as pretty related.

### **5 IN YOUR VIEW, WHAT ARE SOME OF THE MOST URGENT QUESTIONS SCHOLARS IN GWSS NEED TO BE ADDRESSING TODAY?**

I think, personally, it's the relevance of the field. Given the current political climate and backlash worldwide, nothing is easy about this. Scholars need to reiterate how important these questions are and how they apply universally, however you identify. This sort of research and this sort of thinking can only benefit humankind. It's super difficult to do without being defensive. The attacks are political and academic. Judith Butler, major queer theorist, has been tackling this head-on. She's looking at why it is that gender is being demonized everywhere. Where is this coming from? What kind of societal control do people want to oppose by demonizing questions of gender? That's the kind of thing GWSS scholars have to keep in mind. I think everyone is, you

know, keeping it in mind, but there's always the fear of losing your job. Depending on what university you're at and what's going on, if your job doesn't survive, you can't do very much but think about trying to survive yourself. It's in flux, at the moment. And this means, by the way, that every kind of research is important. It doesn't have to change something right away. It's about questions of knowledge and understanding.

## **6 WHAT KEEPS YOU MOTIVATED IN YOUR SCHOLARSHIP AND TEACHING?**

The teaching is easier because, on occasion, a student will come up and talk about how the classes they've taken in GWSS, or my classes specifically, have transformed the way they understand themselves and who they are. There can be nothing more important than that. I know my own professors transformed who I am, but no one ever did it in a way that speaks closely to my identity, and I would have wanted that desperately. So, I created it myself as best I could. That's easy. The experience of teaching and making people ask questions—that's the most important thing I could possibly think of.

My scholarship, though, is more difficult. I write about writers, and I sometimes doubt myself and think, "Well, if people are interested, they could just read the writers and figure it out themselves. What am I doing, interpreting this?" What I forget, in moments like that, is that someone has to be able to contextualize and articulate the writers' experiences in a way that helps create a greater understanding of the human condition. The writers can't do it themselves. It takes someone who can articulate things from a different vantage point to advance knowledge and understanding of how these artists got to where they are and how that has impacted their own identities. It's important to have the perspective of someone who may share certain elements of identity with them, but is able to translate it to someone else. It reminds me a little bit of when I wrote my most recent book. The first editor, Terry Ann White from the University of Western Australia, said "I want a typical, heterosexual man to understand why reading your book is important to him. I want it to change his perspective of the world." That's exactly how she put it. It struck me, because I never thought of my book as doing anything like that. She really wanted it to be able to create an understanding of people from a vantage point that never had to think about these things before. That's still what drives me.

I'm going to a conference in two days. I'll be presenting on a Russian poet who lived in Brazil. While he's super important, no one ever talks about him, partially because he was publically gay and the Russian diaspora rejected him. Yet, every time I talk about him, people will come up and say how moving and important it was

to hear about his life and his work and what it means, to have the analyses, because they had never thought about it before. Then, they're going to go back and approach their own work differently. Sure, if they're in the audience then they are probably interested anyway, but not exclusively.

## **7 ANY FINAL REMARKS?**

I teach undergraduates. I have occasional graduate students, but because we don't have a graduate program, everything that I'm talking about in terms of teaching and research is in an undergraduate context. I've had amazing work, research, independent studies, senior theses, and capstone projects done by undergraduate students. The nature of Gender and Women's Studies is that, sure, you accumulate knowledge by reading all these theorists, but it's still fundamentally centered on your own experience. Expression of that is valuable, from the beginning of college if not before, and throughout your life. The most important thing is to get people to engage with who they are. I wasn't encouraged to do that when I was that age. I was told to be quiet.