

27 January 2023

Dear admissions committee members:

Graduate school recommendation letters often traffic in hyperbole, but believe me when I say that Rayne Billings is one of the most talented, most thoughtful, most capable students I have ever taught in my 22 years in the profession. I often counsel students to reconsider applying for graduate school, but I have no reservations whatsoever with Rayne. Their natural talent, alongside their incredible work ethic, means that they are going to be a superstar. It's not a question of whether they'll pursue and earn a master's—it's a question of where. I hope that Evergreen's master's program in Environmental Studies will be able to offer them a spot next year.

I first met Rayne in the fall of 2022 in my queer literature course (ENGL 418). It is unusual to meet an undergraduate whose grasp of queer theory, not to mention queer literature, is so expansive—and correct. Often, students will understand parts of a theory, or parts of a school of theory, or the “pop” versions of theory, but Rayne's knowledge of Judith Butler, to name just one example, is comprehensive. This is no small feat, for understanding Butler requires a prerequisite understanding of Aristotle, Freud, Kristeva, Lacan, and Foucault. Rayne's deep understanding of other queer theorists is likewise impressive: Stryker, Bornstein, Rubin, Sedgwick. I mention this because it signifies Rayne's ability to thrive in demanding and intellectually complex spaces, which is a fairly anodyne description of the graduate school ecosystem.

What I valued most about Rayne's membership in our class was their generosity, patience, and intellect. Indeed, it was frequently the case that their classmates looked to them as a leader and translator of some of our more difficult concepts. Rayne's ability to consider many sides of an issue, and challenge presuppositions about our current thinking of issues (from the binaristic thinking that infects much of queer studies, to the weaponization of identity politics, to the historicization of sexual identities, to the erasure of trans materialities) offered a freshness to the curriculum that benefitted everyone involved. As a classroom presence, I have found few students to be as dynamic as Rayne.

They are also quite busy on campus, having worked as one of our most trusted marine science research assistants, where they studied the relationship between increased cortisol levels in humpback whales and the tourist activities that may precipitate rises in the hormone that causes deleterious effects on cetacean

wellbeing. Were that not enough, Rayne has also studied killer whale behavior in Southeast Alaska, producing an identification guide for whale watchers, a prelude to a much larger project in which Rayne plans to study seasonal orca migration patterns using hydrophones and GIS data. Work of this depth and quality by an undergraduate is rare. If anything, it should reassure the committee that Rayne is already well positioned to meet the demands of graduate-level research.

I hope that by now it is clear that I have exceptional faith in Rayne's social, intellectual, and emotional maturity. I do not expect to work with a student of their caliber again. If I can be of any further assistance as you make your decision, please contact me at jay.s@alaska.edu or 216-505-0509. Any program would benefit from their inclusion in it. I encourage you to make that program yours.

Very sincerely,



Jay Szczepanski II
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