

# Trans Readings

A Legacy from Myself to Myself

## ABSTRACT

This essay discusses the meanings and possibilities of trans readings. Taking departure in the multitude of cross-dressings, non-binary identities and gender variations of the history of literature, the essay argues for broad understandings of trans. Such themes are often impossible to translate into modern-day terms, but nonetheless vital to trans readings. The essay also argues for alliances of different readings, attempting to engage in both similarities and differences of intersex, lesbian, gay, and trans. The category of trans is impossible to separate from other categories, and the so-called trans/cis binary is in itself an illusion. Still, that does not make trans any less fruitful as a point of departure; either as discussions of transing genders in fiction or the meanings of fiction for trans-gender persons.

**THERE IS, AS** anyone who has attempted a PhD knows, an old saying that no matter what your PhD thesis is about, it's about you. Or possibly your mother.

If you're a scholar in transgender studies, no one will disagree. As a matter of fact, even my therapist giggled (are they allowed to do that?) when I told her about my PhD and that I'd been working on it for five years but still hadn't told my parents I was trans. The lunchtime discussions on how this-or-that dead old writer is a symbol of the innermost dreams and fears of this-or-that colleague always went quiet as I entered the room. There is nothing interesting, funny, or surprising about

a transgender scholar in transgender studies. At best, it is acceptable. Mostly, it is regarded as a little embarrassing. Will you please stop talking about yourself?

Well, let's talk about me.

I was 31 years old when I started writing a PhD thesis on the history of trans literature and I was 32 years old when I truly began to identify as transgender. (Another therapy session, another life.) The PhD decision was triggered by a very simple realisation. For a long time, I had been aware of the multiple representations of cross-dressing, gender transgression, and gender reversal in fiction of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. I worked as a publisher of 19<sup>th</sup> century fiction and had written a master thesis on 19<sup>th</sup> century fiction – I knew all about the obsession with categories of male and female during that century. What I suddenly realised was that no one seemed to be analysing such representations “as” “trans.” At first, I just didn't get it. Where were all the discussions on the history of trans literature? And why couldn't anyone give me a decent definition of trans fiction?

## Trans What?

Trans fiction *can* be defined as fiction written by transgender persons about trans (see i.e. Tolbert and Peterson eds. 2013 for such a definition; Peterson 2014 for a more thorough discussion on the subject). That definition may – like all definitions – be disputed, but it is most definitely a relevant one.

Unfortunately for a literary historian, a definition that presumes writers to be “trans” excludes any history other than the most recent. The word “transvestite” (the first in a series of words that many years later developed into the umbrella term “transgender” in the 1990s, see Stryker 2006, 2–3)<sup>1</sup> was introduced by German sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld in 1910. Before that, it is difficult to speak of any kind of “trans”-composite. Even worse, we can hardly speak of gender identities and identifications at all before the *fin-de-siècle*. Research still has numerous gaps when it comes to the history of living outside of the gender binary before the 20<sup>th</sup> century (although research has been done, see i.e. Dreger 1998;

Mak 2012; Sears 2014; Skidmore 2017; in a Swedish context, Bondestam 2010), but it seems that it was not until then that gender identity in the Western world began to look anything like we expect it to today. However, that doesn't mean that there were no persons with lived experiences of what we would today call trans. There are a number of 19<sup>th</sup> century terms for such gendered positions (such as "hermaphrodite," "two-sexed," "androgynous"), and although they cannot be described through a framework of gender *identity*, which does not mean that they cannot be described.

The applicability of the term "trans" may be contested – and it has been, to the point where it seems impossible to even think the words "trans" and "history" in the same sentence without writing ten pages on why and why not.<sup>2</sup> I'm very pragmatic. If a term is suitable to the material I'm researching and comprehensible to the audience I'm addressing – then it suits me fine. The difficulty of working with historical material, in my view, is to make room for its complexities, allowing it to remain at once familiar and utterly unrecognisable. To use my own words in order to convey my own analysis, however, is no big deal. If it works, it works.

In my PhD research, I was entirely uninterested in whether this-or-that character could be described as *really* trans. I took an easy way out of such debates by adopting an understanding of trans as movement and using it as a verb, transing [*att göra trans* and *transgörande*], drawing on the work of Susan Stryker (2008) and Finn Enke (2012) as well as Sweden-based trans scholar Wibke Straube (2014). That departure enabled a very wide definition of trans. I had no wish to discuss whether a character was trans enough to fit in my investigation. I was interested in reading together themes that could be described as transgender in today's nomenclature, and themes that could certainly not. Quite simply, I decided to view all departures from expected gender as transing, ways of *doing* trans. I settled with the terms transmasculinity and -femininity in order to describe all characters who – regardless of motive or consistency of their transing – move away from assigned sex, or change between several genders, or who altogether refuse gender.

## Reading on and between the Lines

What, then, may be included in a trans reading? Alexander Eastwood (2014) has outlined a possibility of trans readings exceeding works with obvious trans characters. Eastwood describes his frustration over the limited amount of texts he has been able to place within a trans literary canon, and argues that it is not necessary to look for actual descriptions of or about trans experience in fiction. Instead, we can look for resonances, themes, and issues that relate to contemporary experiences on an emotional level.

Eastwood has a point. But the lack of a history of trans literature that he correctly describes is not due to the lack of relevant material, but to the fact that few scholars have studied such material from a transgender studies perspective (see Chess 2016, 177–8 for a similar argument). Experiences, expressions, and lives similar to the ones we would today refer to as “trans” have been portrayed for a long time. They are not only beneath the surface, but also on it, in plain view.

Culture from all ages include characters that may be described in terms of cross-dressing, gender variations, sex reassignment, non-binary identities, etcetera. During some periods and in some genres, they have been very common. The cross-dressings in early modern English fiction and drama is a well-known phenomenon (Traub 1992; Chess 2016), as are the androgynous almost-but-not-quite women of German romanticism (Hoeveler 1990; MacLeod 1998). Particular characters and stereotypes have reoccurred through time, such as the cisgender woman in male clothing that Laura Horak (2016) has spotted in around four hundred silent films and that also appear in variation Gertrud Lehnert (1994) calls “the loyal wife in male clothing” (my translation);<sup>3</sup> or the mannish transfemininity of the panto dame (Radcliffe 2011), originating from *commedia dell’arte* and continuing well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century as the “high het entertainment” (Butler 1993, 126) of films like *Some Like It Hot* (1959) and *Tootsie* (1982).

I could go on giving examples, but one might rightfully ask oneself what these representations – sometimes idealised, sometimes hostile – have to do with trans. Transing characters are not always translatable

to what we would call transgender, and are quite often representations of cisnormativity. One typical trans narrative of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, for example, is doing trans as a secret: A person (that has often been presented as secretive and mysterious) reveals themselves or is revealed by others (to the reader and/or the other characters of the novel – cp. Seid 2014) as having presented themselves as being of another sex than the one they were assigned at birth. Subsequently, order is restored by a return to assigned sex. Such stories do not portray characters that could be described as “transgender” in any modern sense of the word. Still, they may still help us to think through and analyse trans issues.

My favourite example is from pseudonym N.O. Body’s (real name Karl M. Baer) autobiography *Memoirs of a Man’s Maiden Years* (2006), first published in 1907. N.O. Body was assigned female at birth but re-assigned male when an adult, an event which reconciled his juridical sex with his sense of self. His story of his childhood is one of confusion and loneliness, being unable to understand why he doesn’t feel at home in the girlhood everyone expects of him. Until, that is, he reads about the Greek hero Achilles: “Then, by chance, I read the story of Achilles, whose mother gave him female garments. With feverish excitement, I read the legend to the end. I rejoiced. I was saved!” (Baer 2016, 32)

According to the myth, Achilles was masqueraded as a girl in his childhood (and then, as a teenager, accidentally revealed himself by being oh so very, very masculine; on the myth see Heslin 2009). Achilles is in other words a cisgender man temporarily cross-dressing as a girl in ancient Greece, much unlike N.O. Body who was an intersex man in late 19<sup>th</sup> century Germany. But when N.O. Body reads the myth of Achilles, he understands that what happened to Achilles must have happened to him: He is a boy that is being raised as a girl.

N.O. Body’s use of the ancient Achilles resembles José Esteban Muñoz’ (1999) concept of disidentification. Muñoz (1999, 4) uses the term as “descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere.” As Muñoz points out, this is not always a *good* strategy, but sometimes it is the only one available. In lack of proper role models, people have used

whatever has been at hand. The cisnormative perspective of a certain story, myth, or stereotype doesn't mean it can't be a meaningful starting point for trans readings.

### **Why Trans?**

I guess it's clear by now that I am arguing for a broad understanding of trans readings. Categories are always already mixed up and intertwined anyway, there is just no sense in trying to keep them neat and separated. An obvious example is the distinction of trans and intersex literature, noticeable through N.O. Body above. Experiences of being trans and of being intersex are certainly not equal, although similar – perhaps, sometimes, in some ways (for an introduction, see i.e. Morland 2014). Regarding history, the word “hermaphrodite” has included both what we would today call trans and intersex persons, as well as same-sex desires and all sorts of gender transgressive behaviour (some of which would not even be labelled gender transgressive today). As for the history of literature, intersex perspectives on fiction are still few (but for exceptions, see Koch 2017; on contemporary fiction, see Amato 2016).

When it comes to trans and intersex versus lesbian or gay readings, it is impossible to identify the borders between sexual desire and sense of self in most pre-20<sup>th</sup> century material. In other words, to write the history of trans literature inevitably means to mingle with histories of gay and lesbian literature. Sometimes that has been perceived as a problem. That, for example, the claiming of Stephen in Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) as a transmasculine person somehow eliminates possibilities of claiming them as a lesbian (see Doan and Prosser 2002 for a summary of the extensive research here). But there is really no need for that.

Let's have it all. Let's identify ourselves with whatever we like, and claim whatever histories we need or desire, all at once. Such claims may be understood in terms of kinship and alliance, even as acts of love. It is mine, but it's yours as well.

In that vein, I claim intersex fiction; appreciating the resemblances, acknowledging the differences, asserting the affinities. Julia Ward

Howe's *The Hermaphrodite* (written in the 1840s and published 2004) is certainly a tale of intersex experience, but that doesn't make it irrelevant for trans studies; nor would I say that the cross-dressing story of Théophile Gautier's *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835) is irrelevant from an intersex perspective.

Also, I claim lesbian fiction. I claim *The Well of Loneliness* as part of my inheritance, and Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues* (1993), obviously, but I also claim Margareta Suber's Swedish classic *Charlie* (1932) – no matter that the masculine main character is a cisgender woman. I claim Émile Zola's *Nana* (1880) and I don't mind if you claim George in Enid Blyton's *The Famous Five* because I claim them, too.

I claim gay fiction. I claim the porno *Letters from Laura and Evangeline* (1883) as an erotic fantasy by a transfemale gaze. I'm not saying it's not gay, but I'm not saying it's altogether homosexual either. I claim *Sins of the Cities of the Plain* (1881) while I'm already at it, and *Teleny* (1893). I even claim Aidan Chamber's youth classic *Dance on My Grave* (1982) – I don't care that it's about a gay guy that only reluctantly dresses in female clothing in a short scene at the end of the book, because my hands still tremble from the first time I read it.

And furthermore, I claim trans fiction. I insist that there *is* a point in naming trans and thereby appropriating this inheritance. That naming does not mean there are no other namings left. I claim trans fiction as a literary tradition of its own, but one that is deeply intertwined with histories of intersex and gay and lesbian, as well as cis and straight.

An admittedly fair critique of trans readings is that naming all gender transgressions “trans” hides the gender transgressions of cisgender, thereby consolidating the much critiqued cis/trans binary (Enke 2013). I have been asked, on multiple occasions, whether insisting on the label “trans” does not run the risk of recreating male and female as solid and binary positions. So far I've found that looking a little further into the supposed binary of cis/trans, it tends to dissolve all by itself. Transing leaks out of all sorts of fiction and the characters analysed to construct both trans- and cisgender categories. This makes such divisions into trans and cis categories problematic in themselves, but also interesting.

It indicates clearly that the categories aren't fixed, and that their boundaries will always be breached.

One example is Swedish grand thief and autobiographer Lasse-Maja (real name Lars Molin, 1785–1845). Lasse-Maja became one of Sweden's biggest celebrities during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and is still a sort of folk hero. Their fame was, presumably, due to what seems to have been an utter lack of respect for any boundaries or authorities (and, of course, the ability to talk about it). Although nowadays mostly referred to as a cross-dressing man, Lasse-Maja's autobiography relates constantly switching between male and female, apparently not preferring the one over the other. Lasse-Maja is particularly suited to demonstrate how the cis/trans binary tends to fall apart. Take, for example, the multiple desires directed towards them. Lasse-Maja is desired as a cisman (by several girlfriends, and more or less every woman that sets eyes on them while they're male), a ciswoman (by most people who sees them while in female clothing: several boyfriends, a few sister-in-laws, female employers, and Johns), and a transwoman (by people who learn they are trans, which is the case with several other girlfriends and casual male relations). Those desires are in some ways trans specific, in others not. And, of course, most certainly queer.

### **What's Queer about Trans?**

The relationship between queer and trans studies has been a complicated one. That story has been told before (see i.e. Bettcher 2014 for an outline), and I won't go through it again. I'll settle with discussing what distinguishes trans readings from queer ones.

If we assume that a queer reading works to demonstrate the unnaturalness of nature (and that "queer" can be described as a critical perspective studying the norms that construct and uphold sex and gender, and make some sexes and genders and sexual practices appear to be natural, unchangeable and essential) then a queer reading is well suited for analyses of trans. Stryker's (2004) classic article (thirteen years old and counting) still makes a valid point when describing transgender studies as queer theory's evil twin:



[I]t has the same parentage but wilfully disrupts the privileged family narratives that favor sexual identity labels (like gay, lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual) over the gender categories (like man and woman) that enable desire to take shape and find its aim. (Stryker 2004, 212)

What separates queer and trans readings is a difference in perspective and aim. Demonstrating the un-naturalness of nature *can* be part of a trans reading, but it is not necessarily or unambiguously so. Transing destabilises the gender binary both by making that binary visible and by questioning its limits and relevance. But there are numerous varieties of the transing characters of fiction, and the only thing they all have in common is that they articulate conceptions of gender. If the subversive and destabilising potential is what motivates studies of trans fiction, then trans fiction becomes a limited field of study.

Transing characters are not necessarily subversive, and they do not always question normative conceptions of sex and gender. As Sara Ahmed (2000, 125–33) points out, we can't settle with establishing that passing means crossing the limits, since the crossing itself also stabilise the limits that are being crossed. For example, the trans narrative “doing trans as a secret” that I mentioned earlier takes its point of departure in the assumption of an innate sex, solidly anchored in the body and non-negotiable. In other words, trans is not always queer. And what's more: The question of when and how trans *is* queer or not is not at the centre of a trans reading.

## The Legacy

The centre of a trans reading is transing genders in fiction, and the analysis of those particular genders (non-binary, un-assignable, changeable, unstable) as sometimes different and sometimes similar with cisgenders. Also – transing genders or not – a trans reading may be about the meanings of fiction for transgender persons. By the latter statement, we return to me.

For a long time, I used to revel in the thought of delivering a speech after my defence. I would list all the things I've been secretly pretending to know all these years, everything I'm really, really bad at and all the things

I failed to do. I thought it would be a laugh, seeing as I had already been announced a doctor by then. (I checked, obviously, and apparently it is very rare that someone's PhD title is removed.) A few weeks before it was time, I mentioned this plan to my mother and watched her face go white. That, together with the fact that my therapist had started insinuating a self-destructive tendency on my part, made me give up my plan.

So instead, let's talk about what I did do. The legacy.

I was 37 years old when I finished writing a PhD on the history of trans fiction. The people who had not yet received the news of my coming out did so when seeing it in print. My conception of "trans readings" grew on its own, out of a bleeding heart and a bleeding head. Trying to pinpoint it now I can't say I was aware of what I did, but to summon up, here is what I think a trans reading should be:

1. A trans reading takes departure in trans.
2. Consequently, a trans reading is not necessarily queer, or subversive, or whatever. Nor is it necessarily not those things. That is simply beyond the point.
3. However, a trans reading must keep awareness of the fact that although "trans" remains in focus, this is one focus out of several possible ones. There is no such thing as a clean-cut category, and to decide upon a point of departure demands awareness that different perspectives are entangled with each other and impossible to separate.
4. In line with that, there can be no trans reading without acknowledging that the trans/cis binary is a (temporary and unstable) construction.
5. There is no fixed nomenclature that suits all trans readings, but a trans reading must take into account the concept of "transgender" that is in use today. We may use whatever words we find useful about whatever gender transgressions we speak of, but we need to remember that it is today's concepts that will be in the back of the mind of today's readers. This is inevitable, and as scholars we need to hold ourselves accountable in that respect.

I can't say I'm sure my own trans readings live up to my standards. I did my best and that's good for something. And I am looking forward to reading rich, complex, nuanced trans readings; the ones I wasn't smart enough to make. I am also looking forward to trans readings becoming a sufficiently established field for the discussions to take off. I'm counting on the trans readings of the future to strip my thesis to bits – the nomenclature, the misunderstandings, all those books I never found and the perspectives I never thought of. In all honesty, the prospect of it excites me.

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## NOTES

1. Anyway, the scholarly field of transgender studies is still young enough to be updating terminology in a pace that makes yesterday's news be not only old but long forgotten (see Enke 2012, 4).
2. Not that such elaborations are not necessary or interesting. Recently, historian Emily Skidmore (2017) has argued for the term "trans men," underscoring the importance of such discussions; of which Genny Beemyn (2013; 2014) has set much of the tone, together with early and important contributions by Jason Cromwell (1999a; 1999b).
3. Die treue Gattin in Männerkleidern.