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VARIATIONS: TRANSGENDER MEMOIR, THEORY AND FICTION

A thesis submitted to the University of Sussex for the degree of Doctor of
Philosophy in the Faculty of English

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GEORGINA JULIET BUCKELL (JULIET JACQUES)

SCHOOL OF ENGLISH

CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	4
DECLARATION	6
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	7
NOTES ON FORMATTING	8
INTRODUCTION	9
CHAPTER ONE: TOWARDS A TRANS-HISTORICAL UNDERSTANDING	17
<i>A NIGHT AT THE THEATRE</i>	21
<i>A NIGHT AT THE THEATRE: DRAMATISING THE PUBLIC AND THE PRIVATE, THE POLICE AND THE PRESS</i>	34
<i>A WO/MAN OF NO IMPORTANCE</i>	39
<i>A WO/MAN OF NO IMPORTANCE: VICTORIAN LITERATURE, QUEER SUBCULTURE AND THE CRIMINAL LAW AMENDMENT ACT 1885</i>	53
<i>RECONFIGURATION</i>	58
<i>RECONFIGURATION: FEMALE-TO-MALE PEOPLE AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF SEXOLOGY</i>	81
CHAPTER TWO: AUTOBIOGRAPHY, ACTIVISM AND CULTURAL REPRESENTATION	88
<i>DANCING WITH THE DEVIL</i>	91
<i>DANCING WITH THE DEVIL, TRANSSEXUAL MEMOIR AND MASS MEDIA</i>	108
<i>NEVER GOING UNDERGROUND</i>	113
<i>NEVER GOING UNDERGROUND AND THE GAPS IN LGBT HISTORY</i>	132
<i>‘THE TWIST’</i>	140
<i>‘THE TWIST’: HYBRID FORMS, TRANS THEORY AND THE SUSPICION OF MEMOIR</i>	196
CHAPTER THREE: TOWARDS A THIRD WAVE OF TRANS WRITING	207
<i>CROSSING</i>	211
<i>CROSSING AND BRITISH TRANS THEORY, PRAXIS AND PERFORMANCE</i>	231

<i>TIPPING POINT</i>	237
<i>TIPPING POINT: BUYING IN, OR SELLING OUT?</i>	260
CONCLUSION: FICTION, THEORY AND MEMOIR AFTER THE ‘TIPPING POINT’	265
BIBLIOGRAPHY	278
Word count: 82,821	

ABSTRACT

This practice-based, Creative and Critical Writing PhD consists of eight short stories that tell a history of transgender (hereafter trans: a label that covers transsexual, transvestite, transgender and non-binary) people in the United Kingdom from the Victorian period to the present, and a critical thesis about the uses and possibilities of such a project after nearly a century of writing by transgender people that has almost exclusively been autobiographical or theoretical, putting my stories (or ‘Variations’) into their historical, political and theoretical contexts. Between them, the Creative and Critical aspects of my PhD demonstrate not just the infinite possibilities of gender self-identification, but also the possibilities for their creative expression, helping to ignite a British literary culture that is not just *transgender* but also *trans-genre*.

Based on extensive reading, interviews and research, my creative practice moves from the constitution of trans identities via urbanisation (shown in my first story, *A Night at the Theatre*), legal persecution (*A Wo/Man of No Importance*) and sexological definition (*Reconfiguration*) to the challenges of the media ‘outing’ transsexual people (*Dancing with the Devil*), the marginalisation of trans people within gay and lesbian-led political movements (*Never Going Underground*) and the portrayal of trans people within mainstream UK cinema during the 1990s (*The Twist*). Moving into the 21st century, it looks at some of the fractures that made it harder for trans people to organise outside of mainstream political parties or LGB (and not always T) institutions (*Crossing*) and the frustrations of trying to work within the mainstream media, to make trans people not just more visible in themselves, but also to raise awareness of their social concerns (*Tipping Point*). The stories are set in a variety of locations – several take place in London, but others play out in Cardiff, Manchester, Brighton and Belfast. They feature a range of protagonists, starting with male-to-female cross-dressers, taking in the country’s first transsexual men of the inter-war period, to the transsexual women who found themselves on the fringes of the gay liberation movement after the partial decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1967, and the emergence of non-binary people in the 21st century.

The Critical Commentary builds on this process of creative-critical practice. It looks at how and why memoir became the dominant mode of trans writing, with autobiographical

texts becoming a crucial means for trans authors to counter the tropes of exploitative press coverage. It also asks how transgender theory arose (almost exclusively in North America) through critiques of those memoirs, addressing the work of Kate Bornstein and Sandy Stone in particular. It looks at the reasons for those two genres forming the framework for nearly all writing *by* trans people *about* trans people until very recently. It concludes by proposing that new forms are needed that will enable more complicated contracts between authors and readers than have been possible in non-fiction works; and enable us not just to bridge, but to transcend the divide between ‘memoir’, which has long been characterised as written for ‘outsiders’, and ‘theory’, positioned as being written for ‘us’ [trans people]. In this light, it concludes that fiction, because of its capacity to speculate about characters’ motives rather than simply describe their actions, might be able to provoke people to think about the historical presence of trans people, and the formation of a ‘community’ with shared social and political concerns, in different ways.

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be, submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree.

Signed:

Date:

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I am deeply grateful to Margaretta Jolly and Sam Solomon for their supervision of this thesis, as they provided great insight and encouragement throughout. It was a pleasure to return to the University of Sussex after ten years away, and find that it remained a natural home for me and my work: I must also thank Vicky Lebeau and Rachel O’Connell for helping me to locate not just the right project, but also a source of funding – my gratitude also goes to the Consortium for the Arts and Humanities in the South-East (CHASE) and the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) for their generous support. I am also grateful to the team at Somerset House Studios, where I wrote most of these stories.

Over the years, I have been glad to be able to exchange ideas with a number of trans activists and writers, some of whom – Christine Burns, Roz Kaveney and Nat Raha – are named in this thesis. Hugh Fell, Em Temple-Malt, Louise Wallwein and Sarah Wilkinson were wonderful interviewees for *Never Going Underground*, and I am grateful to Ra Page for commissioning it in Comma Press’ *Protest* anthology. Thanks also to Josh Appignanesi for reading ‘*The Twist*’ and providing feedback on the workings of the film industry, and comrade Georgy Mamedov at the American University of Central Asia in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan for providing a platform for me to discuss this project with a completely different audience.

NOTES ON FORMATTING

I decided to interweave the Creative and Critical Writing sections of this Ph.D. into a single paper, as outlined on the Contents page. There is an overall Introduction, and then three sub-sections consisted of an introduction, followed by a story, and then a critical commentary on that story. Finally, there is an overall Conclusion, then the Bibliography.

As the stories are written in a variety of styles (explained in the Critical sections) that (often) replicate existing forms, certain formatting decisions need an explanatory note. *A Wo/Man of No Importance* and *Reconfiguration* use footnotes to explain references in the texts; I have kept these as footnotes rather than converting them to endnotes to make it easier for readers to immerse themselves in the narratives, and to emphasise that these notes are an essential formal device for these stories. (Consequently, the endnotes refer only to references made in the Critical commentaries.)

In *Reconfiguration*, R.'s testimony is presented in Baskerville Old Face (11pt) to distinguish it from the surrounding text, matching the convention in Havelock Ellis's *Eonism* (1928), on which the story is based. Meanwhile, *'The Twist'* is written as a screenplay, so I have used the UK film/TV industry's standard formatting as much as possible, setting it in Courier New (12pt), indenting dialogue and character names accordingly, including the 'FADE IN:' and 'FADE OUT:' usually found at the beginning and end of each scene. I only used a couple of standard abbreviations in the script: 'OOV' means 'Out of View', and 'V/O' is voice-over.

Finally, *Tipping Point* is a collection of blog posts, set in 2014: the use of Arial font for the dates and brown text for the posts' titles replicates the format of early 2010s platforms.

VARIATIONS: Transgender memoir, theory and fiction

INTRODUCTION

'I suggest constituting transsexuals not as a class or problematic "third gender," but rather as a genre – a set of embodied texts whose potential for productive disruption of structured sexualities and spectra of desire has yet to be explored.' (Sandy Stone, *The Empire Strikes Back: A Post-Transsexual Manifesto*)¹

First published in 1987, trans artist and media theorist Sandy Stone's call for gender-variant people to explore space between male and female through *writing* launched a revolution in the way that transgender identities were constituted. Stone's text was circulated via early 1990s digital networks, inaugurating a line of transgender theory and activism that, over the following decades, moved from the margins into mainstream media, leading to *Time* magazine's famous 'Transgender Tipping Point' article of May 2014, and beyond.²

The prominence of *Time*'s claim – accompanied by a photograph of *Orange is the New Black* star Laverne Cox, then the world's best-known trans actor – set a paradigm for discussions about the nature of trans media representation, politics and theory, and how they related to each other. This led activists to reassess the future promised by *Time*, and the state of relations with the medical establishment and political institutions. It has also meant reconsidering a twenty-five year history of Transgender Studies (with many key texts collected in the two *Readers* co-edited by Susan Stryker, with Stephen Whittle and Aren Z. Aizura), a century of sexological texts, fifty years of feminist responses to the possibility of sex reassignment surgery and increased flexibility of gender roles, as well as many memoirs written by trans people, plentiful enough to be recognisable as a genre by the time Stone wrote her influential manifesto.

Stone's text was a response to Janice Raymond's *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male* (1979), which posited male-to-female transsexuality as a plot to infiltrate the feminist movement, prompted by Stone's employment at women-only Olivia Records. However, Stone opened not with Raymond, but a critique of tropes in

transsexual memoirs, notably *Conundrum* (1974) by well-established travel writer Jan Morris, for decades the most read book of its kind in the United Kingdom. Stone noted that ‘Each of these adventurers passes directly from one pole of sexual experience to the other. If there is any intervening space in the continuum of sexuality, it is invisible.’³ Challenging their conflation of learned gender roles with physical sex, Stone asked who these texts were *for*, as the Gender Identity Clinics, which handled patients in North America and the UK, did not consider them as reliable insights into the transsexual condition. The Clinics insisted that patients tried to ‘pass’ in their acquired genders, making it impossible for them to talk about areas beyond the male/female binary and how the Clinics forced them to adhere to traditionalist ideas of how men and women should behave – the basis of ‘radical’ feminist claims that transsexual people were inherently conservative, conforming to outdated gender stereotypes.

Stone’s call for a ‘post-transsexual’ breaking of this silence implicitly required people not just to see themselves as inscribed bodies that could disrupt established notions of sex and gender, but to do so by smashing the boundaries between textual genres. Several works that followed in the 1990s and 2000s combined autobiographical detail (understanding that, as the second wave feminist slogan put it, ‘the personal is political’) with attempts to pull together histories of trans and gender non-conforming people, or empirical research and statistical data on contemporary issues such as access to healthcare or social violence. Despite Stone’s clearly-stated disdain for many of the tropes – or blind spots – that characterised the transsexual memoirs of the mid-20th century, the first wave of transgender theorists did not do away with personal testimony, but put it to a different use within different formats, speaking more to other trans and non-binary people than outsiders in the hope of galvanising a historically disparate community into a more open, honest and politically expedient conversation.

Whilst they often blurred the line between theory or political manifesto and memoir, most of this first wave of transgender texts were clearly non-fictional, but two influential books cut across the divide. Kate Bornstein’s *Gender Outlaw* (1994) followed Stone by asking if the establishment of a ‘transgendered writing style’ could ‘produce an identification with a transgendered experience’.⁴ Bornstein presented personal reflections and political commentary in the same volume as her play *Hidden: A Gender*, and *The Seven Year Itch*,

a (directly autobiographical) piece for performance, but whilst Bornstein followed Stone's imperative to 'mix genres', both in its author's refusal to identify as male or female and its hybrid structure, each part was clearly marked 'memoir' or 'fiction'. Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues: A Novel* (1993) avoided many transsexual memoir clichés by writing a semi-autobiographical 'novel', which did not require the resolution of a 'conundrum' and which allowed the author to go further in describing certain traumas as *ze* would not feel obliged to 'strip or be stripped' or provide a sense of closure to a reassignment process as one might in a conventional memoir.⁵

*

This paper will ask about the possibility of a trans *fiction*, what might constitute a trans aesthetic in Anglo-American culture, and how that might serve trans people. It will also ask why there are so few British theoretical texts or novels written by trans-identified people, or from a trans perspective: is it useful for the terms to convey trans experiences to be set almost exclusively by North American writers? To what extent could their works serve as a basis in other national contexts, or genres – in particular, historical fiction? Could (and *should*) British trans writing differ not just in content but also in form? Perhaps it does not make sense to speak of a literary form that is somehow indigenous – the short stories included here take their inspiration from the international modernist styles of the mid-20th century – but what are the specific aspects of UK trans history that could inform domestic literature by trans authors, and is historical fiction the best genre to explore the formations of our identities and political concerns? How might such fiction explore the legal persecution of cross-dressers and 'sodomites', early 20th century sexologists' creation of categories to define gender-variant behaviours, mass media portrayals of transsexual and transgender people, and trans authors' use of memoir and theory to counter those portrayals and start to organise themselves politically?

My historical fiction, which forms the Creative element of this paper, explores not just how cross-gender living intersected with apparently 'universal' themes such as embodiment, consciousness and identity, but also its most consistent and important aspects, such as the need to 'pass' in one's acquired gender, complications to love and sexuality, transphobia in the family, the workplace and the wider world, and the

obligation to write autobiographically, or to devote oneself to activism just to improve one's own situation. This latter point is crucial: this type of fiction, particularly in its short form, can escape the 'before and after' conventions of the memoir and isolate specific problems and experiences. My stories are also a realisation of Stone's ideas about mixing genres, bringing the positive aspects of the transsexual memoir and the critiques used by Stone *et al* as a theoretical basis for transgender theory into the work. 'Historical fiction', after all, refers primarily to *content*, and by using not just different characters and different periods in my stories but also different *forms*, implicitly asking which ones might be best able to convey not just a narrative about trans history but the emotional and practical realities of our lives. Stone wrote that 'We need a deeper analytical language for transsexual theory, one which allows for the sorts of ambiguities and polyvocalities which have already so productively informed and enrich feminist theory.'⁶ Fiction has always been fertile ground for exploring such ambiguities and polyvocalities: through my writing, I hope to move towards a deeper imaginative language for trans literature – one that may even *mix* genres in the way that Stone and Bornstein demanded, analogous to the way that trans and non-binary people have mixed conventional gender categories.

What follows, then, in both my stories and in my critical commentary on them, does not make a complete, or even clean formal break with memoir. Indeed, I was surprised by the extent to which I kept returning to the genre, which was not planned, or done particularly consciously: having found that theory did not disavow autobiographical material entirely, I ended up finding that my fictional work did not either – and that, as it was for the theorists, this proved to be a productive tension rather than a contradiction to expunge. This work could never have existed without Stone and her theorist successors, whose critiques of memoir were hugely influential on it, but several of my short stories – in particular *Dancing with the Devil* and 'The Twist' – engage directly with the genre of transsexual memoir, looking both at its positive possibilities in providing a sympathetic counterpoint to prurient or sensationalist post-war media coverage of transsexual women, and at its negative possibilities, in how the intersection of the form with the publishing market and a transphobic society could encourage elisions and falsehoods.

By 'transsexual memoir', I mean works written by openly transsexual people, documenting their processes of transition from childhood to sex reassignment surgery and

beyond (with a fuller description of its lineage and tropes given in chapter 2). This, indeed, is the genre in which I was primarily working before starting this PhD, and in writing this, I found myself combining personal testimony with critical reflection in a way that had characterised my journalism and essays published between 2010 and 2015. Again, I will discuss these, and their influence on this project, throughout this paper, during which I have found myself unable – even unwilling – to discard with autobiographical writing, preferring instead to think about how it might feed into a different textual mode, and help to shape its formal and political potential. Ultimately, the quest-like personal narrative that underpinned the classic transsexual memoir enabled me to write these stories and this paper, incorporating it as I did to conceive of the trans community's move from memoir to theory to fiction as an ascent, unfolding in a similar three-act structure to the one used in autobiographical texts (discussed in chapter 2).

Having provided some definition of the 'transsexual memoir', I would like to pin down the term 'trans' – one that deliberately makes space for a wider, broader set of gender-variant identities. In his book *Transgender Warriors* (1996), which combined more direct autobiographical writing with a history of gender variance from Ancient Rome to the 1990s, Feinberg used transgender as 'an umbrella term to include everyone who challenges the boundaries of sex and gender.'⁷ This included, but was not limited to, transsexual people, transvestites, intersex people, androgynes, cross-dressers, drag kings and queens, masculine women and feminine men. It was an attempt to reconcile a long-standing conflict between transsexual people and cross-dressers, in which each had tried to distance themselves from the other, but also hit upon several identities that had been claimed by both the transgender movement and by gay/lesbian politics. I will take Feinberg's inclusive spirit as a starting point but will use 'trans' to denote people whose gender identity does not match the one assigned, and – when discussing writers, particularly those active since the 1990s – identified as 'transsexual' and/or 'transgender'.

In *Gender Outlaw*, Bornstein lamented that 'up until the last few years, all we'd be able to write *and get published* were our autobiographies... the romantic stuff which set in stone our image as long-suffering, not the challenging stuff'.⁸ I related strongly to this when I read it in 2004, and I still do now, having documented my transition twice: first in a *Guardian* blog called *A Transgender Journey* (2010-12) and then in *Trans: A Memoir*

(Verso, 2015). In both cases, there were political reasons and socio-economic constraints that led me to these forms, that were linked: editors believed that readers wanted personal trans narratives rather than social commentary, and commissioned accordingly; this, coupled with liberal publications' idea of free speech meant that anti-trans feminist commentators could set the terms of discussion with little reproach. (Notoriously, Julie Bindel's 'Gender benders, beware' piece in *The Guardian* in January 2004 concluded: 'I don't have a problem with men disposing of their genitals, but it does not make them women, in the same way that shoving a bit of vacuum hose down your 501s does not make you a man.'⁹)

I felt that an autobiographical account placed in *The Guardian* – Britain's main liberal outlet, and one of the most-read news sites in the world – could counter hostile commentators by shifting the conversation away from their terms. It meant accepting the pressure to write memoir, with its obligation to 'strip or be stripped', but an extended series could point readers towards the social issues of cross-gender living, as well as trans history, politics and culture, showing that readers *were* interested in these issues. It could also undermine the stereotypes on which anti-trans feminism relied – as Carol Riddell argued in her response to Janice Raymond, staking a 'claim [to] the integrity of our own life experience' would unpack clichés and render crude generalisations (such as Bindel's) untenable.¹⁰

The blog proved popular, and an agent suggested I turn it into a book. Once again, the form I used was dictated by the market, as per Bornstein, twenty years earlier. This meant I could not use the 'autofiction' form, fashionable in the early 2010s, where the protagonist shared the author's name and some personal details, but the reader was challenged to establish which events had been invented. I found the genre interesting, having long been intrigued by the ways in which modernist and postmodernist authors made explicit the ways in which their novels incorporated many of their own experiences, and my favourite recent examples included *I Love Dick* by Chris Kraus, Jean-Philippe Toussaint's *Autoportrait (à l'étranger)* (translated as *Self-Portrait Abroad*), *How Should a Person Be?* by Sheila Heti, and Lars Iyer's *Spurious* trilogy.¹¹ But there was an ethical problem, too: inventing episodes in which I encountered institutional or social transphobia would have felt too playful to deal with such a serious subjects, and might

have trivialised important discussions about these issues or even brought activist work on them into disrepute.

Compelled to stick to the facts of my own life, I thought that the memoir could serve a similar function to the *Guardian* blog, as the increasing quantity and quality of trans mainstream media representation that had led to *Time*'s 'Tipping Point' had inspired a vociferous kickback by transphobic feminists and reactionary conservatives (often in an awkward, counter-intuitive alliance). I decided on a hybrid form that combined autobiographical chapters with short theoretical asides that looked at Stone, Bornstein, Feinberg *et al*, the pitfalls of first-person writing and the deadlock caused by cultural gatekeepers' attitudes about how got to talk about trans people, how and why. I used the Epilogue – an interview about my post-transition relationships with my body, writing and the media, conducted with Sheila Heti – not just to discuss the impossibility of 'blend[ing] fiction and autobiography'¹², but also to talk about the pressure to 'cannibalise myself' by writing about my own life.¹³ In this, I aimed to circumvent not just the memoir/theory dichotomy but also the question of whether we wrote for cisgender or trans audiences – my memoir did not aim for people at either end of that binary, but those who wanted to explore a non-conformist gender identity but may not know where to start.

Once the memoir was published, however, I wanted to return to my first love: fiction. As an undergraduate studying History at the University of Manchester, before I became vexed by questions of selling my writing, I often wrote short stories featuring trans protagonists, inspired by the modernist and post-modernist authors that I read. I wanted to build these into a volume that explored trans lives across a range of geographical and historical contexts, but it did not feel expedient to write something that felt so marginal when mainstream media representation of our issues was so poor. In any case, in the mid-2000s, I did not have the life experience, historical knowledge or theoretical tools needed to make it work. My best story, *The Invented Past of Marina*, about a transsexual woman trying to hide her personal history, used two narratives, intended to run down the left and right-hand pages of a book. On the left was a mundane bourgeois conversation, like many I'd endured during garden parties in my youth; on the right was Marina's inner monologue, chastising herself about the lies she had to tell in order to 'pass'. Even then, this story resonated with my own experiences of hiding my gender dysphoria, and had

some relevance to a wider trans community despite my lack of any real-life engagement with it, but it was a (deliberately) solipsistic piece, and I struggled to write further stories that would move my trans characters beyond such micro-social settings. Over a decade later, having said all I had to say about my own life, and read so much about trans history and politics, the concept and scope of my short story collection has finally become clear: it tells a potted, poetic history of trans people in the United Kingdom from the Victorian period to the present, exploring the effects of legal, medical, sexological, political, theoretical, literary and media discourses upon their lives. The process by which I researched and wrote the stories, and the results, are presented below.

CHAPTER ONE: Towards a Trans-Historical Understanding

By summer 2011, I was two years into the ‘Real Life Experience’ required by West London’s Gender Identity Clinic as part of the reassignment process, and one year into my *Guardian* blog. The latter had been surprisingly well-received, partly because readers responded well to the way I framed my experiences within a wider context, with hyperlinks and open comments so they could easily find more information. With my higher profile and personal connections, I could convince editors that readers *were* interested in coverage of issues beyond individual narratives. I wrote more directly about trans history, politics and culture in blog posts, for the *New Statesman* and elsewhere, and had related dialogues with various people via Twitter and ‘in real life’, learning so much, and seeing which issues were not widely understood.

I was looking for a new project as *A Transgender Journey* approached its conclusion, but didn’t want to turn it into a book: there were already plenty of transsexual memoirs out there, whilst trans people seemed under-represented in almost every other form of art. At a talk in London, I met a *Guardian* columnist who was friends with Julie Bindel and other ‘gender-critical’ feminists, but who had also written in praise of Kate Bornstein in 1994, before any other mainstream UK journalist.¹⁴ We had a conversation in which this writer repeated the line about transsexual people conforming to gender stereotypes, and how this hurt them. I replied that the Clinics imposed these on service users; I was surprised that this writer had not considered the transsexual perspective on this, which was so familiar to me. This led to an epiphany: *there needed to be a history of trans people in Britain*, which documented the specific realities of domestic trans lives, to form a counterpoint to the largely North American theory that my journalist friends and I had read (and which would, of course, make extensive use of personal testimony, if not of published transsexual memoirs). And – unlike with my youthful efforts at a volume of trans-themed short stories – I now had the resources to write it.

My starting point was Susan Stryker’s *Transgender History*: a 150-page volume published by a small Californian press in 2008, and the only study I knew of how modern trans identities had been formed through a process of urbanisation, legal repression, medical categorisation, media sensationalism, political organisation and cultural

expression. Stryker, an American academic and filmmaker, had written a US-centric book, but provided a useful sense of how ‘the rise of modern industrial cities’ during the 19th century allowed ‘men [*to*] leave tight-knit rural communities, characterized by innate and interlocking forms of familial and religious surveillance’, letting them ‘form different ... emotional and erotic bonds with other men’.¹⁵

I realised that the process Stryker referenced had begun in the United Kingdom, the world’s first industrial society.¹⁶ British gay histories would often note that though parliament passed just one law against non-reproductive sexual activity before 1828 (the Buggery Act 1533), the authorities had always linked cross-dressing with ‘sodomy’, seemingly unable to imagine that men would cross-dress for reasons other than to trick other men into sex. London’s 18th century ‘molly houses’ – clandestine venues for cross-dressing and inter-male sex – confirmed their suspicions. The loose networks of parish constables who enforced the city’s law often infiltrated them, with help from informers. Those caught were charged under the 1533 Act; few were convicted as ‘buggery’ was notoriously difficult to prove, but of the forty arrested in February 1726 in the raid on Mother Clap’s molly house in Holborn, three were hanged.

As the Industrial Revolution continued and expanding urban areas offered more anonymity, individual men began to feel more confident in dressing as women, not just at private masked balls but also on the streets. Amidst a moral panic about ‘vice’ in London, the Metropolitan Police was founded in 1829, and soon began games of cat-and-mouse with the cross-dressers. After a series of trials that rarely resulted in punishment beyond a fine and a stern warning, parliament passed legislation against ‘unnatural offences’. The notorious Section 11, or ‘Labouchere amendment’, of the Criminal Law Amendment Act 1885 made public or private acts of ‘gross indecency’ between men punishable by two years in prison, with the possibility of hard labour. Most famously, this led to Oscar Wilde’s imprisonment in 1895, after a trial in which his dress, mannerisms and works were parsed for allusions to same-sex desire, which fed into the popular characterisation of ‘the homosexual’ as a dandyish aesthete – and a type of person who could be legally targeted.

Looking for specific cases to help me chart this shift from prosecution of ‘buggery’ to ‘gross indecency’, I noted the title of H. G. Cocks’ book: *Nameless Offences: Homosexual Desire in the 19th Century*. I was delighted to find his meticulously researched list of 17 male-to-female cross-dressers whose trials for misdemeanours such as ‘Meeting together’, ‘lewd acts’ and the tautological ‘female attire’ were reported in British papers between 1800 and 1890.¹⁷ The phrase ‘female attire’ was important. Instinctively knowing that it would never have been applied to clothes worn by a cisgender woman, I took advantage of a crucial technological development since *Nameless Offences* was published in 2003: digital newspaper archives. Searching the *Manchester Guardian*, *The Times* and the Google News Archive for ‘female attire’ unearthed reports on the trials of some people mentioned in Cocks’ book, as well as several others not listed.

This unexpected abundance of source material led me to produce a sample chapter about the Victorian period, but ultimately, I never wrote my history: I could not find time to send it to publishers before my sex reassignment surgery in July 2012. My *Guardian* post about that, written days after I left the hospital, was widely shared; soon after it was published, an agent suggested I write a book that weaved my reflections on trans politics and culture into a transition story, elaborating on the technique and material in *A Transgender Journey*. I still preferred to focus on the wider history project, but publishers – like newspaper editors before them – were more interested in a memoir and would only consider a non-fiction project if the autobiographical one sold well.

As I worked on *Trans: A Memoir*, I re-read Stone, Bornstein and others for the first time in ten years; re-watched films such as *The Crying Game* (1992) and *Stonewall* (1995) for the first time in twenty; and went through numerous memoirs, articles and blogs. Soon, I realised that writing a history was not quite the right project. A non-fictional approach would mean I had to address lots of difficult questions about who counted as ‘trans’, which stories got told, within which overarching storyline, and how far it was possible for a single person to write an objective, definitive historical account. Having struggled with the burden of representing (or, at least, not *misrepresenting*) the trans community as a journalist and memoirist, I felt fiction may allow me to represent that community in more playful and pluralist ways, raising questions rather than trying to answer them, and allowing me to think creatively explore the relationship between literary *forms* and gender

identities. It would also form a progression from memoir: both for me, and the wider community. It was time to resurrect my plan for a volume of short stories. On my first attempt, I had felt that 'transgender' was enough to constitute a common theme; now, I realised the history of British trans people and communities would provide a more solid – and authentic – structure. I could get around the problem of re-treading the transition narrative by putting different characters in each story, simultaneously moving the focus from individual anxieties to period-specific political issues and representing different trans identities as they emerged. Finally, I had a follow-up to my memoir that excited me.

A Night at the Theatre

Tuesday, 17th March, 1846.

I found this article in the 'Police' section of *The Times* to-day:

BOW-STREET.—Yesterday a young man, in woman's clothes, named John Travers, was placed at the bar before Mr. Hall, charged with frequenting the public streets for an unlawful purpose.

This was the second or third case of the kind which has been brought under the notice of the Court within the past few weeks.

I bought a second copy, cut out the article and posted it to Simon, with a letter.

Dear Sir,

This article came to my attention. It details a crime of the most abominable nature, and a vice that is becoming increasingly prevalent in our city. It is imperative that you pay me a visit, so that we can discuss how to promote greater vigilance; I suggest meeting this Saturday.

Yours,

A Concerned Citizen.

Thursday, 20th March, 1846.

Sir,

The report you sent induced feelings of the greatest disgust in me, and you are right to be concerned. I agree that we must assist the authorities in preventative measures. I shall see you on Saturday.

Sincerely,

A Dagger-bearer.

Saturday, 22nd March, 1846.

Simon came to my lodging-house at ten o'clock. I opened the door and saw him with a sly grin on his face, his brown eyes lit with mischief. I let him get inside before I put my arms around him and kissed him on the cheek. He paused for a moment, and then brushed past, looking beyond me to the stains on the floor.

"Heavens," he said, "this place is as disgusting as Devil's Acre! How much are those charlatans extorting you for this?"

"Fifteen bob a week," I replied, with a sigh.

"That strikes me as the very definition of *dirt-cheap*."

"I agree about the *dirt*, but twelve and sixpence a week on coals? It's ruining me! The shop has all the vibrancy and vitality of a pauper's funeral, and so, I have concluded that I have just one remaining option," I said. "I'm going to have to get married."

"The confirmed bachelor!" he laughed. "Seriously, my good fellow, you would have to find a lady who was born *yester-day*."

"I don't know *what* you mean," I replied, brushing my hair behind my ear. "I could marry one of *those* women. Someone like Phoebe Hessel."

"Who?"

"She disguised herself as a man to join the Army," I told him, showing him a cutting from one of my old journals.

"That's all well and good until your wife gets posted to Australia," he said. "That said, if they find out about you, they'll send you out to accompany her."

"How would they ever know?" I asked. "Imagine that you have joined the Metropolitan Police or trained to become a man of law. Would you waste your time with a married man when so much vice stalks the capital's streets?"

Simon looked over at my suitcases and asked what might happen if the land-lady opened them. She bloody well would, too, I said, knowing how she'd been rooting around in Collins' place, which is why I keep them under lock and key – but in any case, it still hasn't occurred to her to check under the bed.

"And if she does," I said, "Well, I'm in a play."

"What if she doesn't believe you?"

"I'm sure I can find another lodgings, just as luxurious."

I pulled out a case and opened it.

“She’s away this weekend, visiting her old lady in the countryside. She will not return until tomorrow – I checked. Here – look at this.”

I showed him the blue frock that I’d ordered to the shop.

“I told the dressmaker it was for one of our mannequins. I’ve tried many of our wigs with it.”

“With the mannequin?” asked Simon, smiling.

I winked at him. “You’ll see that it follows the fashion of to-day. Narrow sleeves, low shoulders and a bell-shaped skirt. And only the best crinoline, of course.”

“Quiet, someone will hear us!”

“It’s a present for my sister.”

“You don’t *have* a sister!”

“They won’t know that. Besides – they might see her at some point.”

“Oh, no ...” said Simon, his eyes rolling and his jaw dropping. I showed him the *Times* article.

“It says here that Travers went to ‘the public thoroughfares near the club-houses in Pall-mall East’, and the streets around it.”

“Yes, and he got caught,” replied Simon. “They thought he was a dollymop.”

“Only because he kept going to the same place and someone blew on him. The cops thought he was a woman, they just told him to move on.”

“That’s not what happened to the men at Mother Clap’s molly house, is it?”

“I won’t go there, then. Anyway: ‘Inspector Partridge said, that from what had come to his knowledge, he was satisfied that the object of the prisoner and his associates, in frequenting the parks and streets, was either to steal or to obtain money by practices of the most revolting or unnatural character,’” read Simon. “Heavens, James – he was lucky not to be hanged!”

“He told them it was just a bet that he ‘would pass undetected in his disguise. A mere frolic.’”

“And they didn’t believe him,” said Simon. “Would you?”

“If I’d only seen him once or twice, then who knows ...” Simon looked at me. “Why not?”

This brought back all the times in Goldsand’s Dressmakers when Simon had come in: that first afternoon, when he said he wanted something for his wife’s birthday and I thought I saw a kindred spirit; the way he would sit on the window-ledge and make conversation, for an hour or more when the inspiration struck him; the times when he came after leaving his solicitors’ office, once I’d closed, and we pulled down the shutters, lit the candles and had dinner together, him in his suit and me as his wife ...

“If I go to Pall-mall then perhaps I *will* get caught, at least if I go too often. Or if I talk to strange men. But once – just *once* – wouldn’t it be wonderful to walk the world as Jennifer?”

“*Will* it be once?”

“I don’t know, but it would be awful to go to the grave without trying it, wouldn’t it?”

“Worse than gaol? Worse than the gallows?”

“None of that will happen, as long as I make sure they don’t think I’m a margerie. We’ll keep away from the ‘dark courts and narrow passages’.”

As the word “we’ll” left my lips, Simon’s eyes widened, and he turned his cheek to me.

“You’ll keep guard, won’t you?”

“Look, it’s one thing keeping such matters behind closed doors ...”

“Once I’m done up, they’ll never suspect me. It’ll be fine, if we don’t go to the wrong places.”

“Where are the *right* places?” asked Simon.

“The ones in the newspaper,” I replied. “Holborn, Fleet-street, Leicester-square.”

“They’ll be onto those by now.”

“We could go to the theatre – I’ll be your wife. Who would even look twice at us? Next time, somewhere else, we could switch. What do you say?”

“*I’m* not going out in all those petticoats,” he said. “If you really *have* to, then I can pretend you’re doing it for a bet, but if they fine you *100l* like they did Travers then I can’t help.”

“What’s *100l* next to one night of being myself?” I replied. “Next Friday – *Twelfth Night* at the Drury-lane Theatre. One and sixpence for the lower gallery. Wouldn’t it be fun?”

“If ending up at Bow-street is your idea of fun, then yes,” said Simon.

“If that happens – the whole thing was my idea. A lark amongst friends. They’ll let us go.”

“It will be so humiliating!”

“We’ll tell the police that your name is Robert Hopkins and that you’re a labourer. I’ll be George Watson, bricklayer. No-body will ever know we were there.”

Simon said that no-body would believe that I was a bricklayer. I thought that any court would be so shocked that they would believe any-thing, and that they would be far less concerned if they thought they weren’t dealing with gentlemen. He just sighed. I asked if we had a deal.

“If you absolutely *must* ...”

Saturday, 29th March, 1846.

Wearing his finest black tie, Simon came at five p.m. to help me prepare. I got out my frock, petticoats, shoes, corset, bonnet and wig and laid them out on the bed, blacking out the window so that no-one could see. My whole body was shaking with excitement, although I was trying not to get *too* excited. Once I had taken some deep breaths to calm myself, I undressed.

“Will you be able to help me with my corset?” I asked, in anticipation of that glorious moment where he pulled the cord tight.

“Do you *have* to wear this?” he asked as he laced it up. “It looks dreadfully painful.”

I said that the frock wouldn't have the right shape without it. Then I grasped the bedpost with both hands as he put it around my stomach, laced it up and pulled as hard as he could. I yelped.

"Quiet, people will hear!" he hissed. Then he looked at my chest.

"What are you going to do about ..."

I pointed him towards two halves of a small coco-nut, resting on my table.

"Do you want to put them in?" I asked, smiling.

He sighed, held my shoulders so that I would be still, and placed the halves into the cups on my corset. I loved how they itched, and how gently he moved them, taking every care to get them in the right place. Then I put on my little white trousers with the frills around the ankles.

"What do you need those for?" he asked. "No-one is going to see them, surely?"

"Not unless there's a sudden gust of wind. Or, worse still, I fall over. Then I'd look quite the harlot, wouldn't I?"

"What will you put on your feet?"

"Just these," I replied, going to my wardrobe. "They're black, flat, with a wide toe. They don't look so different to men's boots, so I keep them with the others. I'll put them on last. Next – the petticoats. Stop stroking them!"

"They must be unbearably *uncomfortable*!" said Simon. "All that horse-hair!"

"They won't touch my skin. Sadly, I cannot say the same for the coco-nuts."

I put on the petticoats, ensuring that they would give my lower body the right shape. Then I picked up the dress, shook it to straighten it out, and unlaced it at the back.

"Help me, would you?"

I stepped into the dress and pulled it up to my shoulders.

“They’re cut so low these days, aren’t they?” I said as I put my hands through the sleeves. “And these frills around these arms. Honestly, they make you look a little whore!” he replied. “You’ll have to make sure it doesn’t drop down over your chest, or people will think that you are quite without modesty.”

I put on my wig and brushed it in the mirror.

“I spent all morning shaving,” I said, looking at how all of my skin between my neck and my hands was covered in lace and satin, my eyes emboldened by all the shadow and mascara, the curls falling just above my eyebrows. “But the effect is marvellous, don’t you think?”

“I should have worn less rouge,” Simon told me. “But otherwise, you look quite the lady.”

“You think so?”

“I’d marry you.”

“Oh, my darling – I’d marry you too!”

I threw my eyes around him. He told me not to kiss his cheek because he would get lipstick on it, so I went for his lips. He laughed, but I wanted him to let the moment last longer. Undeterred, I put on my bonnet, and exclaimed: “Now, my *husband* – let us go to the theatre!”

I paused, listening out for any voices, footsteps, doors opening and closed.

“Can you hear anyone on the staircases?”

“No,” Simon told me.

“Could you please check?”

Simon opened the door and looked around.

“I think the going is good. Come now.”

We stepped outside. Suddenly I became aware of the breeze pushing my frock against my legs, shooting up my skirt; of how much my coco-nuts juttred out and how many people might be staring. I worried about my wig blowing away, as no-body would be convinced by my hair, cut shorter last week after a few remarks from the land-lady. I tried to hold my head up and act as naturally as one could in such an outfit.

“Do you know any of your neighbours?” asked Simon.

“I could not distinguish a single one of them from Adam,” I replied. “I came to know enough of my neighbours in Copthorne to last me a lifetime, thank you very much.”

A man walked past. He didn’t look at me until he brushed against my skirt. Then he gave me a glare, like I had wronged him somehow. I said nothing, and he carried on.

“I’m not sure that I will be able to sit through even the first act in this,” I said, referring to the whalebones in my corset. “How do ladies do this? And *why*?”

“We make them,” said Simon.

“You would think that they would complain.”

“I’m sure they do.”

“Everyone is looking at me,” I said, trying to ignore two passing men focused on my chest.

“Do you want to be seen?” he replied.

“No, I want to be left alone.” I took Simon’s arm. “Perhaps we should stay at home.”

“You want to abandon the ship *now*?”

“Perhaps not, but I don’t know whether to stick to the back-streets or try to blend in.”

“We’ll take a cab. The driver probably won’t notice, but if he does, we’ll throw him a few more pennies. And don’t swing your arms so much!”

We hired a hackney-carriage from Great Peter-street. A gentleman and his wife overheard Simon telling the cab-man to take us to Drury-lane, and said they should like to ride with us, as they were also going to the theatre. I tugged at Simon’s jacket, but he just said, “It’ll save us a few bob.” He gave me a look to suggest there was nothing we could do to stop them riding with us, and that I would do best to keep quiet.

“A night at the theatre, is it?” said the man. Simon nodded. “A rare treat for you, madam?”

What did he mean by this? I thought to myself. *Had I dressed like a pauper?* I just smiled, and he went on about a Christopher Marlowe production that he’d seen somewhere. I kept nodding, thinking that this insufferable bore’s monologue would mean, at least, that he wouldn’t be looking at my waistline and thinking it might be too big, that my hands were a little too large, or that my Adam’s apple might be visible. I put one hand on the other and held my head down.

“How long have you two been married?” he suddenly asked.

Yearning for our brief moment in my lodgings, I stumbled for an answer. Before I found one, Simon told him that we were betrothed three years ago, and I clasped my hands in the hope that our interlocuter did not look for a ring.

“Well, I wish you a wonderful night, and all the happiness in the world,” said the man. “I must say,” he continued, looking at me. “You don’t speak much, do you?”

“A good lady knows to speak only when she is spoken to,” replied Simon, looking at the man’s wife. “Don’t you agree?”

“I’m not sure that I do,” she answered. “But such are the times.”

I’d never really thought about that, I realised as the words passed her lips. I felt a little hopeless, and watched as she twisted her ring, pointedly looking away from her husband and out of the window. Simon asked the wretched man about other plays he had seen, and of course he had no problem telling us. I kept quiet, trying not to speak and not to shake, and I practically skipped out of the carriage when we pulled up outside the theatre, without anyone saying another word to me. The one good thing about this dullard’s presence was that he offered to pay for the ride, which seemed the least he could do. Thankfully, he was going to a private box, and we made our way inside without him.

Simon bought tickets from the box-keeper, and I was surprised to learn that I had to leave my bonnet with the woman at the entrance, giving her a shilling for the privilege. I removed it with care, terrified that I would disturb my wig, but she didn't seem to notice, and if she *did* 'read' me, she mercifully kept her thoughts to herself.

Then we took our seats in the Upper Circle. My petticoats made my skirt so wide; I felt like a cat using its whiskers to get through a fence. I could sense that people were staring at me; as we had arrived early, I kept having to stand so that others could take their seats. As I pulled up my skirts to prevent them from being trodden upon, I saw people looking at my dress, and worried. *Had I worn too much crinoline? Had I painted my face too heavily?* One gentleman winked at me. *Did he know?*

I smiled and sat down. Soon, the curtain rose, and I stopped feeling so anxious – no-body would look at me once the play started, after all. I noticed soon after it commenced that I desperately needed to use the toilet, but I didn't know if they even had one for ladies. After all, I had barely seen any ladies there.

I looked around for such a rest-room during the interval, but before I found one, the man came up to Simon and asked a question.

"Excuse me, sir," he said. "Is this lady ... your wife?"

"Oh, no," Simon replied. "We are just acquaintances on a night out."

"She is tremendously pretty," he continued, "with all these curls."

I put one hand on my head in the hope that he would not touch my wig. Worse; he took my other hand and kissed it. My first instinct was that Simon might be jealous; then I saw some-one glaring at me as I tugged on Simon's coat-tails. *People might think I'm soliciting*, I worried, and I thought it best to return to the theatre.

"I hope you enjoy your evening, madam," he said. We just smiled and went back inside.

During the second half, I noticed a man by the door, eyeing me suspiciously. I tried to ignore him, but every time I glanced back, he was there. I wondered if we should leave,

but we would have disturbed the patrons, and I hoped that if we left with the crowd, we might avoid detection.

We stepped out of the theatre. Two Constables were waiting. They grabbed my arm.

“Excuse *me!*”

“Are you Peter Jordan of Rochester-row?”

“What?” I said, trying to affect my most feminine tone. “Of course not! I’m-”

Then I stopped, realising that my initial shriek had betrayed me.

“I’m *what?*” said the copper. I kept quiet. “A man in female attire, that’s what! You’re coming with me,” he said, laughing. Then he turned to Simon. “Are you with him?”

I stopped almost dead, praying that Simon would stick to our script.

“Yes, sir,” he replied. “I bet him that he couldn’t get through the performance undetected. For a lark.”

“It’s always a lark, isn’t it?” said the officer. “You are also under arrest, you jester.”

They marched us to Bow-street Police Station. It took just a couple of minutes but felt like for-ever, with crowds around the pubs and the theatres staring at me, pointing and laughing. I was so hot that my make-up was coming off, but I wouldn’t let the policeman take off my wig, and besides, I was more bothered about the pain in my back. Luckily, I didn’t see anyone familiar, but I am not sure that they would have recognised me anyhow.

“Why did you go to Drury-lane?” asked the officer as we turned onto Bow-street and saw the station. “It’s as if you *wanted* to come here.”

“And *why* all that crinoline?” said his friend, laughing.

“Sometimes I wonder if you *want* to get caught,” whispered Simon. Then we were separated.

*

Tuesday, 1st April, 1846.

This report was published in *The Times* this morning:

Yesterday a young man, in women's clothes, with short, brown hair, named George Watson, whose general demeanour denoted respectability of position, was placed at the bar before Mr. Green, charged with frequenting the streets in female attire, and for a supposed unlawful purpose. This was the third or fourth case of its kind to be heard by the court in recent weeks, exposing a vice that threatens to become endemic to the capital.

Police constable B 77 said that the prisoner had been apprehended at the Drury-lane Theatre on Friday evening, during a performance of *Twelfth Night*, accompanied by a gentleman named Robert Hopkins. Asked if he had seen the prisoner before, B 77 stated that he had not, but that he had read recent reports about other such men, and could only conclude that the prisoner was similarly engaged in practices of the most unnatural character, possibly to obtain money.

There was much laughter in the court-room as B 77 described the prisoner's appearance, especially the coco-nuts used for a bust and the whale-bone in the corset discovered when the prisoner was stripped at the station, saying that it was the crinoline that induced him to notice the defendant. Asked the reason for being so dressed, the prisoner said that it had been "a lark" and that Hopkins had bet him that he could not "pass" undetected in his disguise.

MR. GREEN remarked that in the absence of any further evidence, the prisoner's excuse would have to be accepted, although on top of whatever forfeit he would have to pay Mr. Hopkins after losing their bet, he would also have to furnish two sureties of 25*L* each, to be of good behaviour for six months, or to be committed in default. The prisoner could but blame himself for this, said Mr. Green, as well as for any loss of position or earnings that resulted.

The prisoner held up his skirts, stepped out of the dock and retired, to the disquiet of the court.

Thinking back to his aside about *wanting* to get caught, I told Simon that it had been worth it, and that I'd do it again. "Not with me, you won't," he said, half-laughing but I knew that he meant it. I said that perhaps we should keep it to the shop, as a compromise, but from the way he shrugged his shoulders, I couldn't tell if he would return. If he does, I'll give him this journal, and promise that our secret will be kept between us, and these leather-bound pages.

A Night at the Theatre: Dramatising the public and the private, the police and the press

During the Victorian period, British industrialisation and urbanisation achieved their height. As a result, fuelled by the emergence of mass media and the concept of ‘sensation’, the dynamic of public cross-dressing being met with state suppression reached the point where the first laws against (ostensibly) sexual activity besides ‘sodomy’ were adopted, raising the stakes for men who dressed as women, in public or private. The first case on Cocks’ list in *Nameless Offences* dates from 1840, three years after Queen Victoria assumed the throne, when James Tetbenham was arrested for wearing ‘female attire’ at Tavistock Square; they became increasingly frequent throughout the next fifty years, spreading from London to Manchester and Glasgow.¹⁸ By the late 19th century, there were anxieties about middle-class immorality, and aristocrats corrupting the proletariat, culminating in the Criminal Law Amendment Act 1885 and Wilde’s conviction, that had not been widespread a hundred years earlier.

This prevalence of cross-dressers being put on trial led me to choose 1846 as an overall starting place: a historical moment when the authorities and the media were aware of cross-dressing as an (urban) phenomenon, but before they had conceived of it as more than a series of isolated aberrations. The ‘molly houses’ struck me as a similar phenomenon to the drag ball raided in Manchester in 1880 (more on which below); both the notorious Mother Clap incident and some of the few cross-dressing individuals noted before the 19th century could be referenced in my first story. Or in later ones, as with the Chevalier d’Éon, an aristocratic French immigrant who lived as a woman in London from 1777 until death in 1810, whose name the sexologist Havelock Ellis used in 1928 to name one of the first British sexological theories about gender-variant behaviour – explored in my third short story, and the final section of this chapter.

I found a *Times* report from 17 March 1846 that provided more insight into a trial mentioned in *Nameless Offences*. This began: ‘Yesterday a young man, in women’s clothes, named John Travers, was placed at the bar before Mr Hall, charged with frequenting the public streets for an unlawful purpose’. Prostitution was also a growing concern for groups such as the Society for the Suppression of Vice (established in 1802 by people concerned about the corrosive effect of Jacobinism on morals) and for the

Metropolitan Police, but there was no concrete proof of solicitation. Therefore, this was a public misdemeanour, apparently ‘the second or third case of the kind ... brought before the Court within the past few weeks’.¹⁹

The *Times* article was short – less than half a column – and barely quoted Travers, which may explain why Cocks’ analysis drew heavily on the police testimony and judge’s remarks that made up most of it. From a trans perspective, I noticed Travers’ attempt to argue that the occasion of his arrest was ‘a bet with a friend that he would *pass* undetected in his disguise’. I saw the evolution of one of the most important trans concepts, that of ‘passing’ – working out how to navigate public spaces in the desired gender without being ‘read’ – as the flipside of authority figures’ claims to have been deceived, made to excuse a failure to arrest, or wilful complicity. Here, Constable C140 claimed to have seen Travers more than twenty times, and that Travers ‘generally resorted to dark courts and narrow passages’ – this observation was the basis of the solicitation charge. However, C140, ‘having always supposed [*Travers*] to be a woman’, simply told him to “move on”; it was only when the other constable testifying, A56, heard a ‘man in women’s clothing’ was ‘in the habit of frequenting his beat’ that he was apprehended. While the judge felt anyone ‘who knew to what extent vices and crimes of the most abominable nature prevailed’ in London would reach ‘most unfavourable conclusions’ from Travers’ cross-dressing and ‘lurking about in dark passages ... in conversation with other men’, there was little evidence against Travers, who escaped with a fifty-pound fine.²⁰

Reading reports such as this, I found a major problem in using them as a basis for a gender-variant history. There was only one permissible excuse for male-to-female cross-dressing: that it was done for a bet, or ‘a lark’. (Looking at the documented instances, ‘lark’ became a cliché). The gap between what defendants said in court and what may have motivated their behaviour has often been filled by cisgender, gay male historians in their discussions of the formation of ‘the homosexual’. Despite the charges all springing from defendants adopting feminine presentation in public, the idea that they may have experienced gender dysphoria as well as, or *above* a sexual inclination towards men does not figure in Cocks’ account. Rather, he insists that this cross-dressing was part of a ‘forgotten vocabulary of desire ... intended to entrap unknowing men into unnatural lust’, but this assumes that those ‘disguised in female attire’²¹ wore it for the reasons the

authorities impugned. Legally, it was impossible for defendants to explain any habitual compulsion to cross-dress, as to admit this could have resulted in gaol, social ostracism, and national humiliation.

In non-fiction, I could only examine Travers' actions, not his motivations; I could not impose contemporary trans identities on him, as these rely upon expressed self-identification. Using fiction, I could speculate about someone *like* Travers, drawing on my experience of feeling compelled to cross-dress in public, anticipating risks and dealing with its realities as I went (as detailed in *Trans: A Memoir*).²² In early 21st century Brighton or London, I knew I would not be arrested, but the threat of humiliation and violence remained present – or (sadly) timeless.

Reading the *Times* report, I wondered if this news coverage stoked the behaviour that these trials aimed to suppress, as people got an idea of where they might 'pass', find like-minded others, the coded language that may allow them to evade the police, and which defences might work in court. Using Travers' case as a basis for *A Night at the Theatre* allowed me to explore a dynamic that could never have been discussed or recorded in official accounts. In private, cross-dresser James (Jennifer) Goldsand – a dressmaker who has moved to London from a Sussex village – tells his friend Simon that Travers 'went to 'the public thoroughfares near the club-houses in Pall-mall East' and the streets around it', suggesting he could safely navigate the public spaces named in reports in female attire if he did not frequent the same spots, and that he could escape punishment by dismissing such behaviour as a bet or 'a lark'.²³

I could only take a few pieces of speech directly from contemporary articles – writing the dialogue for *A Night at the Theatre* was more a matter of giving a gender-variant inflection to the humour in Dickens and other 19th century novelists – but I took James's plans for every eventuality from Victorian reports. The false names and occupation he invents for Simon and himself in case of arrest – which successfully 'pass' in court – were inspired by the trial of George Campbell and John Challis in July 1854 for 'being disguised in female attire' but also 'conducting themselves in a manner to excite others to commit an unnatural offence' in 'an unlicensed dancing place called the Druids'-hall'.²⁴ (I used the 'female attire' charge for my story, but for 'a supposed unnatural

offence' rather than incitement.²⁵) The judge, Sir R. W. Carden, said their case was 'entirely a question of character': i.e. *class*.²⁶ At this point, trials of cross-dressers mostly prosecuted bourgeois defendants: they were expected to uphold the Empire at home and abroad, and so could not become decadent. In one of many defences that now appear comic, Campbell revealed his 'true' identity – Reverend Edward Holmes of the Scotch Independent church – and said he had visited the Druids'-hall 'to see vice in all its enormity, in order [to] correct it from the pulpit'. Rebuked for doing so cross-dressed, Holmes said only 'I am extremely sorry for my folly'; he was discharged.²⁷ But rather than hide behind such 'respectability', my protagonist poses as a labourer, successfully gambling that a judge at this time would not worry too much about someone in a working-class occupation.²⁸

In *A Night at the Theatre*, Goldsand underestimates the high stakes that came with every item of clothing worn in public, every word uttered, every gesture – although he fears that his voice is too deep, and that he will comport himself in an unladylike fashion. The notes recorded in his scrapbook (which he is keeping partly for himself, aware that its discovery could be ruinous, but also for posterity, hoping that it might serve as a record of his presence for any future cross-dressers who happen upon it) express similar issues: '*Had I worn too much crinoline? Had I painted my face too heavily?* One gentleman winked at me. *Did he know?*'²⁹ Goldsand's anxieties that the years of planning behind this one evening have not been enough reach their climax as he leaves the theatre, when two constables arrest him. They use entrapment to coax Goldsand into speaking, apprehend him for 'the wrong voice' and march him and Simon to the nearby Bow Street Police Station.

'Crinoline' was a reference to George Paddon, who stood trial at Worship Street in July 1863, charged with 'having been about the public streets in female attire ... for a supposed unlawful purpose', covered in *The Standard* under the headline 'Quite the Lady'. After dissecting Paddon's male appearance, which denoted his 'respectability of position', their report shared the courtroom's amusement in playing up Paddon's feminine dress on his arrest. The sergeant produced a large crinoline petticoat, a silk dress and a white hat with a lace trim, provoking laughter by telling the court that "she looked very nice indeed, quite the lady" before re-asserting Paddon's maleness, partly through pronoun use and

partly via the revelation that Constable Carney took Paddon to the station to be stripped. None of Paddon's testimony was reported: he was unable to raise 25 pence to secure bail and went to gaol.³⁰

James and Simon's communications capture the methods by which sympathetic people found each other – using their apparent disgust at cross-dressing to raise the subject and subtly explore the territory. This is implicit in their backstory: by the time that the narrative opens, they have reached the point of using such language not just to provide an alibi if anyone apprehends them, but for their own amusement, sending up groups such as the Society for the Suppression of Vice with suggestions that they meet to 'promote greater vigilance'.³¹ Once they are behind closed doors, they can find equal humour in the idea of James finding 'someone like Phoebe Hessel' (who disguised herself as a man to serve in the British Army) to marry, partly for money and partly to ward off speculation about his behaviour.³² Their private jokes form a counterpoint to the public humiliation of people like Travers, Holmes and especially Paddon; Goldsand's decision to keep a record of the entire affair in a secret scrapbook partially counters the impossibility of honest courtroom testimony. It also keeps alive the tantalising dream that one day it may be discovered and might provide the same sort of inspiration to someone else that the Travers story handed to him.

My conclusion to *A Night at the Theatre* – a report that pastiches the ones on the real people named above – hints at how this discourse would develop. The judge's closing remark that 'in the absence of any further evidence, the prisoner's excuse would have to be accepted' highlights a structural problem: with no laws against cross-dressing *per se*, the authorities had to 'suppose' purposes and make sufficiently punitive charges, for which there was rarely any evidence. *The Times* article on Campbell and Challis noted police officer Joseph Brundell was told 'not to interfere' unless he saw 'disgusting conduct ... of other men ... take place in the public street'. Ominously, the judge declared that 'If you always waited for direct proof, you would have very little chance of detecting or preventing crime'.³³

A Wo/Man of No Importance

This text, which recounts events around the Oscar Wilde trial and London's decadent literary and artistic circles, was recently found in an archive at University College London. Its author is yet to be identified; we can guess that it was not any of the writers or artists referenced within, but it is not confirmed whether it was written by a contributor to The Yellow Book.¹ It has a date – 1914 – so we know it was written with twenty years' hindsight; perhaps the author believed that the start of the First World War would mean a relaxation (or, at least, de-prioritisation) of the Labouchere Amendment of the Criminal Law Amendment Act 1885, which made 'gross indecency' between consenting adults, public or private, punishable by two years' imprisonment with hard labour; or that this text could help to change the oppressive climate generated by Wilde's conviction. We do not know if it was supposed to be an article, a pamphlet or a chapter in a memoir, and there is no evidence that it was ever published or circulated, as doing so could have meant its publisher being charged with distributing obscene material, and little proof that Arthur Parr existed, although the ten-year-old recorded under that name in the Ardwick district of Manchester in the 1881 census is most likely its protagonist.

*

I first met Arthur Parr on a winter afternoon in December 1894 or January 1895. Brought to me at a lavish dinner in Bloomsbury, I momentarily mistook him for someone else. The same long, flowing, dark hair, that cannot have curled so much without artifice; the same *debonair* mannerisms, even holding his cigarette in a similar fashion; the same style of frock-coat and velvet blazer. As soon as I realised that he must be nearly twenty years younger, I wondered if Parr had modelled himself on Napoleon Sarony's photographs of Wilde. The first thing he asked, in a broad Mancunian accent that offended the sensibilities of our more refined diners, was if anyone could introduce him to Oscar. It still pains me to admit that my next thought, as I listened to his long list of people with

¹ *The Yellow Book* was a quarterly periodical, edited by Henry Harland and published by John Lane and Elkin Mathews at The Bodley Head (London) from 1894-97, associated with aestheticism and Decadence. Wilde never wrote for it, but Aubrey Beardsley (1872-98), who illustrated Wilde's *Salomé*, was its first art editor. Contributing writers included Max Beerbohm, Ernest Dowson, George Gissing, Henry James, Arthur Symonds, H.G. Wells and W.B. Yeats, with art by John Singer Sargent, Walter Sickert and others.

whom he hoped to become acquainted, was that this young man most likely meant trouble. The ease with which the names left his tongue – Edward Carpenter and Havelock Ellis amongst them – left little doubt about which topic he wished to discuss, and his tone made me feel that he wouldn't be doing so with much discretion. Such an impetuous youth, barely twenty-two, demanding an audience with some of the best minds of his generation – and insistent that he would become the greatest of their company!

Parr explained to anyone who would listen that he was “a writer” whose plays, prose and poetry would eclipse even those of Shakespeare, “and also an artist” whose drawings and paintings would scandalise the Paris of Klimt and Courbet, let alone the London of Labouchere and the Marquess of Salisbury. Such things may be a little way ahead of him, Elkin Mathews told me, but Parr had submitted a handful of poems to *The Yellow Book* and whilst Mathews had not felt them fit for publication, he liked them, seeing the influence of Rimbaud in their youthful idealism, Mallarmé in their dense symbolism, and Huysmans in their sordid self-disgust. So, he encouraged Parr to keep writing, and to meet his contemporaries; he asked me to introduce Parr to Aubrey Beardsley – a young man of his age – as well as Ernest Dowson and Arthur Symons. Beardsley and he soon became close, but Parr was more interested in scientists like Ellis than artists. It took him some time to realise that the two were not so separate; and rather longer to learn the need to be careful about which elements to bring into his work.

Parr had already read everything that Wilde had published and was soon introduced to his idol – via Beardsley, who had illustrated *Salomé*, rather than the editors of *The Yellow Book*, which Wilde had dismissed as “dull and loathsome”. Intrepid, Parr quizzed Oscar extensively about his work on their very first meeting. (A shame, maybe, that his questions didn't prepare Wilde for court.) Parr was so pleased with himself for identifying what he said was a brilliant allusion in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, then in its final rehearsals, to the trial of Ernest ‘Stella’ Boulton and Frederick ‘Fanny’ Park.² “If Boulton

² Ernest ‘Stella’ Boulton (1847-1904) and Frederick ‘Fanny’ Park (1846-1881) were cross-dressers, arrested in London in April 1870 under suspicion that they were the public faces of a cross-class sodomite ring, and subjected by the Metropolitan Police to a medical examination to determine whether they'd had anal sex. This proved inconclusive, and they were tried a year later for ‘inciting others to commit unnatural offences’, amidst great public and media interest. Their lawyers claimed that Boulton and Park's public cross-dressing was an extension of their theatrical roles as ‘female personators’, and that no attempt had been made to ‘deceive’ men into believing they were women; they were acquitted.

is ‘Ernest’ then he walks free; if she’s ‘Stella’ then she goes to gaol,” he declared to the guests at a dinner near *The Yellow Book* offices on Vigo Street. That the dandyish Cecil Graham in *Lady Windermere’s Fan* took his name from the one that Boulton gave to the police on his arrest, Parr said, was proof that his theory was correct, although Oscar was too shrewd to offer anything so vulgar as clarification.

*

Within a few weeks, Parr had met *The Yellow Book*’s leading lights, and it seemed inevitable that he would appear within its pages. He had also met Carpenter and Ellis, who showed him a passage in Richard von Krafft-Ebing’s *Psychopathia Sexualis*, about a woman with a morbid aversion to female attire, and who wanted nothing more than to live as her beloved’s husband. Parr was excited by this, and by a scurrilous novel by ‘Viscount Ladywood’ about a young man forced into cross-sexed servitude by a house of ladies, though I seldom heard him talk about women – just their clothing. When I read *The Intermediate Sex* by Edward Carpenter, on its publication six years ago, there was one passage that struck me as a perfect description of Parr: ‘A distinctly effeminate type, sentimental, lackadaisical, mincing in gait and manners, something of a chatter-box, skilful at the needle and in women’s work, sometimes taking pleasure in dressing in women’s clothes; his figure not unfrequently betraying a tendency towards the feminine ... while his dwelling-room is orderly in the extreme, even natty, and choice of decoration and perfume. His affection, too, is often feminine in character, clinging, dependent and jealous, as of one desiring to be loved almost more than to love.’

Parr spent as much time as he could with the scientists, and naturally, he soon offered to help them with their research. There were many ways he could have done this, I am sure; but he was determined that the best was to find people to attend a men-only fancy-dress ball, to be held at a secret location in London, and along the way, introduce them to Carpenter and Ellis.

Immediately, people tried to persuade Parr of the folly of this. He was convinced, though, that his party could evade the law; and that even should it fail, that the defences of the past would protect him in the present. At another *Yellow Book* dinner, he reminded

everyone that Boulton and Park's argument that their female personas were extensions of their theatrical roles won their freedom, while laughing at the very idea that a 'medical inspection' could prove *anything*. Then, he spoke at length about a ball held at the Temperance Hall in Hulme, Manchester, in September 1880; during his youth, he said, he had known one of its participants. There had been fifty people there, Parr recited; they had made sure that nothing 'unnameable' was visible, covering all windows that could be seen into from the street or neighbouring buildings, with entry only by password. They had even hired a blind organist to play *The Can-Can*.

"That didn't stop them getting raided, did it?" said Dowson, dismissively.

"Perhaps not," Parr replied, smiling. "Although they put up a hell of a fight, given their dress. I wouldn't be so complacent as to leave *any* window without blinds, no matter how hard it might be to peer through. Anyway, their lawyers said that to convict them for 'a vice so hateful that it could not be named amongst Christians' would 'bring shame to all of Manchester'. And of course, the court could not have *that*."

"They got off?" asked Beardsley.

"Twenty-five pounds in fines, and an order to be of good behaviour for a year." (At this point, I wondered if Parr might be capable of such behaviour for a week, let alone a year; and given his lack of any occupation, a twenty-five pound fine would be ruinous.)

"And their names in all the newspapers," added Symons. "What happened to your friend after he handed over his money?" Parr fell silent. "Did he just become some ne'er-do-well?"

"He moved from Salford to Fallowfield. He worked under an assumed name but seemed happy enough to me. Anyway, one is always allowed more freedom if one is a *great artist*."

"You didn't hear about Luke Limner, then?" said John Lane. "They found him on the highway and made him stand in the dock in a ridiculous hat and high-heels. He said that he was an artist, writing a book on female attire, and needed personal experience to treat the subject properly. They still fined him five pounds."

"Perhaps they fined him for making such *terrible* work," Parr retorted, his face dropping as he saw nobody else laughing. "Besides, five pounds is nothing!" he insisted. "We can cover that."

“*We?*” asked Lane.

“What about Edward Hamblar?” asked Walter Sickert, breaking Parr’s silence. “The police caught him in Bromley Street, dressed as a woman. The crowd were going to tear him to pieces – they thought he was the Ripper. He was lucky to escape with a £10 fine!”

“Whoever Jack was, it’s over now,” replied Parr. “And both of your subjects made the mistake of going out in public. I would keep things behind closed doors.”

“Things have changed,” replied Sickert. “That’s no longer sufficient!”

Before Parr could answer, in walked Max Beerbohm. He broke the news that the Marquess of Queensbury, furious about Wilde’s relationship with his son Alfred Douglas (or ‘Bosie’), had been barred from the opening night of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Instead, he had sought out Wilde at the Albemarle Club. After being refused entry, he had left a card for ‘Oscar Wilde, posing sodomite’ [*sic*]. We did not yet know what may arise, but shortly afterwards, Wilde had consulted a solicitor, and Queensbury was arrested for criminal libel.

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If Parr’s fancy-dress ball had been a bad idea before, it certainly was now. What little of the night was not spent discussing Wilde’s wisdom in pursuing Queensbury through the courts was used on talking Parr out of *his* scheme. That effort, at least, was not wasted. He decided, instead, to pen a short story about just such an occasion, basing his work on what he had heard about the Temperance Hall. He promised to write under a pseudonym, aware that publishing such a piece could still draw people to him; in this way, he claimed, his work would help ‘inverts’, and thus fulfil a similar function to that of Carpenter or Ellis.

Even this idea met with considerable scepticism, but Parr went on with his manuscript anyway. Two weeks later, he came back with five thousand words, which began with a beautiful young man who planned to escape the disgust and detachment characterised by Des Esseintes³ by organising a magnificent festival, where men became women and

³ The protagonist in Joris-Karl Huysmans’ Decadent novel *À rebours*, first published in France in 1884 and known to have been a huge influence over Wilde’s writing, especially *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890).

women became men, first by adopting the clothing of the opposite sex, and then, through a fantastical process only known to occur in this ‘sacred’ space, transforming their bodies for one heavenly night. He was much encouraged by Beardsley, whose fantastical romantic novel *Under the Hill* had a protagonist who wore silk stockings and garters (and whose escapades were severely curtailed when Lane eventually published the unfinished manuscript, nearly ten years later), but Parr told anyone within earshot that his work was quite unique. In this, he was right. Lane and Mathews read his story and instantly feared a greater scandal than the one caused by *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Sounding more surprised than they probably should, given Parr’s earlier declaration that his work would generate exactly that, they said they could not possibly include it in *The Yellow Book*’s pages – or, at least, not without him completely rewriting it.

Furious, Parr asked the worth of editors who “butcher their meat so badly that they only ever serve offal”; their suggestion that he use their press to print and distribute it anonymously only enraged him further. He had not, he said, written “some two-bit titillation like *The Sins of the Cities of the Plain*”⁴; in France, he yelled, “even such a philistine as [*Maurice*] Barrès”⁵ would recognise his story as a work of genius, “on a par with Maupassant or Mirbeau”. They told him that their friends were advising Wilde against prosecuting Queensbury, and instead to move to Paris. Knowingly or not, Parr then echoed Oscar’s line about learning who one’s true friends are at such moments; I felt Lane and Mathews generous in telling him to tread carefully, and then making their excuses. Certainly, when I asked him about it the next day, Lane was far more forgiving than I might have been, saying only that similar arguments had occurred before, with other authors, and doubtless would again.

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⁴ *The Sins of the Cities of the Plain; or, The Recollections of a Mary-Ann, with Short Essays on Sodomy and Tribadism* was an erotic novel about the experiences of a rent boy, published under the pseudonym ‘Jack Saul’. Its actual author has never been confirmed, but may have known Boulton and Park, who feature in the text. It was first published in 1881 by William Lazenby, who printed 250 copies. Pornographic bookseller Charles Hirsh claimed to have passed a copy to Wilde in 1890.

⁵ Maurice Barrès (1862-1923) was a French poet, journalist and politician, associated with Symbolism, especially proto-Fascist Italian author Gabriele D’Annunzio. He supported General Georges Boulanger’s aborted right-wing coup in 1889, backed various monarchist and patriotic organisations, and was a prominent anti-Dreyfusard.

Meanwhile, Arthur – or Anthea, as he had taken to calling himself – had become less focused on publishing his story, and more intent on living it. I first met ‘Anthea’ at a soirée on a spring evening in March 1895. I wondered if Parr had arrived so dressed to make a point about our men-only policy, but then remembered that, in all truth, our gatherings were *always* men-only, and the only difference tonight was that it had been made official. Perhaps, then, it was to spite Lane and Mathews. But this was not a *Yellow Book* event, and they did not attend. No: Parr was now referring to himself as an ‘invert’, explaining the concept as Carpenter and Ellis had outlined it, and demanded that we refer to him by this new name. This felt like a huge step, but within reach, as Parr looked resplendent with her hair twisted into a coil atop her head, in rouge and deep red lipstick. I guessed that her gown had come from Paris, with its low neck and high sleeves, in sky-blue decorated with lace – the absolute epitome of the *Belle Epoque*.

Parr had set herself against her publisher, and apart from her contemporaries; the nervousness about the presence of a latter-day Stella Boulton was palpable. At first, the only person willing to entertain her was Carpenter, despite his oft-stated discomfort around the more effeminate creatures who came his way. I saw them in a corner, ensconced in dialogue, and at one point, Carpenter took Parr’s hands and started to implore her. Perhaps he was telling her about Alfred Taylor and Arthur Marling’s recent arrest for wearing female attire to John Watson Preston’s club at 46 Fitzroy-street, and the likelihood of them being monitored by the police ever after; years later, as I read Carpenter’s passage in *The Intermediate Sex* about the Criminal Law Amendment Act and its cruel ‘censorship over private morals’, my mind retracted to that night.

Later, I saw Parr dance with Beardsley and Dowson, with a few fair watching suitors – not least Sickert, whose gaze was contemptuous. Anthea spoke so delicately, moved so freely and danced so gracefully that I almost forgot not just our anxieties about Oscar, about to abandon his case against Queensbury rather than call Bosie as a witness, but also that as far as we were concerned, this was Anthea’s first night in the world. Then, I felt Parr might do well to abandon writing and take up female impersonation. Word had reached us that after his acquittal in 1871, ‘Stella’ had moved to the United States and launched a new career as Ernest Byne. To the thrill of Parr – and everyone else present – Beardsley had acquired a magnificent photograph, again by Mr. Sarony, which showed

‘Byne’ as a high-society lady in a beautiful hat and frock-coat. (After failing to relaunch his career as ‘Fred Frinton’, ‘Fanny’ had died in 1881.) Inspired, Parr asked how she might contact ‘Stella’, and I began to think that having him out of London, and the United Kingdom, might prove better for everyone.

Soon, all were assured that Anthea’s future lay in impersonation, if not on the stage (as she still seemed too coarse for a role written by Ibsen or Shaw, let alone Marlowe or Shakespeare), then at least in the music hall. Perhaps trying to rid our party of her, men lined up to tell Anthea of friends in the theatre – actors, directors, impresarios – who could help. Within days, Parr had arranged meetings, and talked beforehand of stage routines, jokes to tell, and songs to sing. He returned from each encounter empty-handed, however. As Wilde’s libel suit collapsed and he and Alfred Taylor (who, it turned out, had owned a male brothel) were charged under the Criminal Law Amendment Act and taken to Holloway Prison, Parr found no theatre willing to associate itself with an ‘invert’, even if, like Stella, he promised to draft his mother into any potential court case to explain that his masquerade was a harmless game that had persisted since childhood. A move to Paris or New York looked best, and we soon met to discuss it.

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Parr, as we all knew by now, was not built for life’s practicalities, and the necessary work to move across an ocean was beyond him. He could find the money for a ball-gown to be worn once in a lifetime, but not for even a third-class travel ticket; he could impress himself upon London literary circles with seemingly no effort at all, but the idea of meeting new people in another country apparently petrified him. Nobody was willing to lend money to someone so unlikely to repay it, even if he remained in our city, and as the final trial of Wilde and Taylor began, few of us felt able to concentrate on Parr, who – miraculously – had not yet attracted such nefarious attention. Indeed, Lane and Mathews’ principal concern was in dissociating themselves from Oscar; given his oft-stated disdain for their publication, they resented the attention that resulted from reports that Wilde had carried a copy on his arrest when his ‘yellow book’ was actually a French edition of Pierre Louÿs’ *Aphrodite* (which, like most of the French literature that Wilde enjoyed, had a simple yellow cover). Parr was livid when they sacked Beardsley as *The Yellow Book*’s

art editor and removed his drawings from the April 1895 issue, even though they only did it after literary figures publicly lambasted them and their office windows were smashed, and even angrier when they returned his manuscript, insisting that they could never claim knowledge of it in court, and advising that he destroy every copy.

This suggestion, and the impossibility of relocation, only seemed to spur Parr further along a dangerous path, despite the revelation that the police had found plenty of women's clothing at Alfred Taylor's rooms on Little College-street, which would likely be used as evidence against him and Wilde. Once again, Parr was unperturbed – the discovery of a house on Wakefield-street where Boulton and Park had stored their theatrical inventory had not served to convict them, and this news would not prevent him from organising the party of his dreams. I urged Carpenter, who seemed like the only person to whom Parr might listen, to step in, but what more could he say? Clearly, Parr's mind was made up, and the best option for everyone else was to shield themselves from the inevitable explosion: Lane gave him strict instructions not to associate any of this activity with *The Yellow Book*. (In any case, by now, many contributors were scathing, and Max Beerbohm's admonishment was especially harsh: "How are you going to find your attendees? By placing a notice in *The Times*?") Now, Parr was practically alone, having just the increasingly tubercular Beardsley for moral support.

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Several people whom Parr hoped could help were involved with the trial, and I counselled him to stay away from them. He particularly wanted to track down Preston, even after learning that Preston dabbled in blackmail, and seemed unconcerned that the police might still be monitoring the Fitzroy-street premises. He eventually *did* arrange a private encounter with Preston, who thought his plans unwise, but nonetheless put him in touch with John Severs, a tobacconist's assistant who had lost his income after appearing in court (in female attire) for his part in the previous year's ball, but had, like the other defendants, escaped gaol. Severs did not want to attend – a second judge might not prove so lenient – but knew a few people who would, and who also knew a few others who would. Soon, Parr had a small circle of co-conspirators, and now had to find a venue.

One of the group had a family friend who ran a hotel in Aldgate. They would not disclose their real purpose, they agreed, but tell the proprietor that they were holding a party after a wedding. (As it transpired, this contained a glint of truth.) Otherwise, Parr applied all his learning from the Temperance Hall. Entry would be allowed only by password (using the same one – ‘Sister’) and the pianist, recommended by Severs, would be a man of poor sight. Unlike his predecessors in Manchester, Parr ensured that *every* window was covered, no matter how hard it might be to peer into, and that they had an obvious escape plan, to be explained to everyone who gave the password. They had a code-word (‘Cromwell’) for a raid; if it were yelled, they would leave via the fire exit, race down the spiral staircase and head east.

Parr had wanted to make illustrated invites, but Beardsley was too busy, and worried about making himself ill, but would at least attend, and might incorporate certain scenes into future works. Having listened to all this, I had to admit my curiosity. *The Yellow Book* organised a dinner in Bloomsbury, doubtless to give themselves an alibi if Parr and his cohort ended up on trial; I chose to go to the ball, despite hearing via a friend that Taylor been cross-examined in court that morning about having “a woman’s dress”, wig and stockings in his rooms, his presence at Fitzroy-street, and his lack of occupation, but mostly his interest in young men. I had no desire to wear female attire, then or at any other time, but I wanted to see how close Parr’s reality came to his fantasy.

The Cumberland Hotel could never live up to the distant, star-lit plains of Parr’s story, and in truth, nor could most of the attendees. There were about twenty-five – an impressive number, given the understandable reticence of Parr’s invitees – although their costumes proved a huge let-down. (I know mine did: the cheapest suit in my possession, chosen more because it was the most amenable to a hasty exit than for any stylistic reason.) There were just a handful of people in female attire, with the ‘ladies’ outnumbered by more than two to one, and potential suitors further disappointed as two of the ladies danced only with each other. Most were not convincing, either because they were too tall or too broad, or dressed in a fashion fifty years past, in corsets that did little to hide their masculine girth; or in one case, sporting lip-stick and rouge around a thick, brown beard and moustache, which, s/he said, “my wife will not let me shave.” A couple, however, may have kept up their deception for long enough to have some genuine larks.

Certainly, I was momentarily taken in; a few more whiskies, and who knows where an honest gentleman might have been led!

Parr, of course, spared no expense in making himself a work of art, and was never in danger of being upstaged. He had purchased a new dress with even higher sleeves and an even lower neck, adorned with roses, worn with silk gloves and stockings. (Where he found it, let alone how he paid for it, remains a mystery.) ‘Anthea’ was the last attendee to enter, to applause, whistles and Wagner’s *Bridal Chorus*; one gentleman, unfamiliar to me, threw a bouquet at her feet and took her hand. After much revelry, the music stopped. The guests began to cheer and clap, and a man in a suit walked onto the floor to tell everyone that we had gathered tonight to celebrate the holy matrimony between Miss Anthea Parr and ... *Cromwell!*

One attendee must have been an informer, and may have spent the night noting the names and faces of his fellow guests. (It may even have been someone associated with *The Yellow Book*, although I hope not.) Later, I learned that the Manchester revellers had borrowed ‘sister’ from previous balls, which had allowed the police to guess the password and gain access to the Temperance Hall and made it even more reckless for Parr to use it, but maybe nobody had told her so. In any case, I had sensibly, if not courageously, spent much of my evening by the escape. I hurried down the stairs, not looking back as I ran all the way to the London Hospital. I saw Beardsley struggling after me: I sometimes wonder how many years those few seconds took off his life, but he did escape that night, down Leman-street and then to who knows where, but as *The Picture of Dorian Gray* had led us to expect, the police did not follow us into the depths of Whitechapel. Parr, in her corset and long silk train, was not so nimble, nor so lucky.

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At Marlborough-street, Parr was charged on remand with being idle and disorderly in Aldgate, and with being in female attire for the purpose of inciting acts of gross indecency, under the Criminal Law Amendment Act. Privately, we held great discussion about whether Carpenter or Ellis should testify in Parr’s favour, or at least plead for clemency, and how they might do this without bringing literary London into further

disrepute. (Fortunately, the police had not identified Beardsley as one of the attendees.) Parr went to the dock still wearing his gown, his corset and train removed, his hair now far from perfect, his lipstick barely visible and his unshaved facial hair sprouting. He was a sorry sight, as the court took great pleasure in pointing out; they also laughed at his accent, which veered between his native Mancunian, as he hoped that the court might not trouble itself with a Northern vagabond, and the affectations of our crowd, as he struggled to convince them of his ‘good character’. This fooled nobody, as the wealthier patrons – of whom the police had managed to apprehend just six – all agreed that Parr had been solely responsible for the party’s organisation, and that he had tricked them into coming. (The near-blind pianist, in the witness box, affirmed this.)

Parr trembled as the prosecuting lawyer, Mr. Wynyard, cross-examined him about who were his patrons for the ball, how he found them, and whether he had organised such a thing before. He denied the latter, sounding plausible because it was true, but then Wynyard produced a wad of papers, passed on by police after they searched his room for women’s clothing, and which I immediately recognised as enough to condemn him.

Asked if he was a writer, Parr replied balefully that he had no occupation, and lived off money from his father’s cotton mill in Ancoats, Manchester. Asked if he wrote, Parr hesitated, and then: “I dabble.” Shorn of his previous swagger, he did not talk as the lawyer read long extracts from his unpublished and unpublishable manuscript. The scenes of drunken jubilation when the men transformed into women, and submitted to the women who temporarily became men, drew gasps from the jury; Wynyard’s question about “whether there existed a periodical in the land who might even consider publishing such obscenity” drew only silence from Parr.

Then came an attendee, Eric Broughton, who had agreed to testify against Parr. When Wynyard read the scene from Parr’s story “about a wedding between two men”, Broughton detailed the ceremony at the Cumberland Hotel, where ‘Anthea’ had given her hand to Lord Rawlinson-Page, a 52-year-old former General and aristocrat who had recently inherited a fortune, and whom Parr had hoped would provide financial support. Rawlinson-Page had escaped on the night and immediately sailed to France, but could not be traced. Broughton knew nothing else of their relationship; given Parr’s propensity

to boast about almost anything, I was surprised that I had never heard about it, and neither had any of our associates.

Unlike the trial of Wilde and Taylor, there were no young men brought to stand, to my relief. Parr's lawyer tried to argue that whilst he should have known better, being highly intelligent (and clearly of great imagination), his actions were not indecent but youthful folly, which he would surely not repeat after this public humiliation. Parr had an interest in the theatre, they said, especially Shakespeare – unusual for someone of his background – and it was this that had animated him, and nothing more sinister. For his story, however, they struggled to account, making a more general argument about the dangers of criminalising art, which was met with a counter-argument about the dangers of popularising smut. They concluded by appealing to the jury to consider the reputation of London, “the jewel of the Empire”, and not to blemish it by convicting their client of an offence for which there was little proof.

By this powerful speech, I was greatly moved. The judge, Goodhart, held firm. Too many such cases had reached court for them to turn a blind eye, he said, especially with legislation now able to stamp out the “despicable vice” that threatened to overwhelm the city. He mentioned Wilde and Taylor, both convicted in a recent session, and remarked that “decent men” should no more tolerate “such depravity”, and most certainly should not let it pass under the guise of theatre, literature or art. Those who had attended the ball in male clothing were fined £5 and warned to be of good behaviour for three months; those in female attire, £20 and twelve months.

That just left Parr. The leniency of the preceding sentences, coupled with the severity of the judge's remarks, made me anxious that he was going to be singled out, and so it happened. The manuscript and the wedding ceremony were enough for two years' penal servitude with hard labour, and he was taken to Pentonville Prison, where they apparently had strict orders to keep him away from Wilde and Taylor. (In any case, Wilde was soon moved to Reading.)

Staying in touch with anyone convicted under the Criminal Law Amendment Act was risky, and none of the *Yellow Book* contributors did. Just before Parr's release, Beardsley

– the only one who maintained even sporadic contact – converted to Catholicism, renounced his drawings and writing and moved to the French Riviera in the hope of halting his physical deterioration. This proved unsuccessful, and Beardsley died in March 1898. Parr was broken by his time in gaol, and did not even achieve his hero's infamy: the judge may have had no reservations about staining the national character, but the newspapers did, feeling that the Wilde scandal had caused damage enough and providing minimal coverage. I spent many sleepless nights thinking about whether to describe the proceedings as I saw them from my position in the public gallery, for a newspaper or elsewhere, wondering if Parr might *want* the notoriety of national coverage. I never asked him, though: I decided that if Parr had a *Ballad of Reading Gaol* or *De Profundis* in him, he could better write it himself. He never did.

After his release, Parr – still only 27 – needed a long rest and a change of location. Three years too late, we finally managed to get him on a boat to New York, on a one-way, third-class ticket, using money provided by The Bodley Head. I never heard from him again, and dared to imagine that, like Boulton/Byne, he had successfully reinvented himself on the American stage. Four years later, a telegram arrived at John Lane's desk, telling us that instead, Parr had gone the way of Beardsley and Wilde, but with nothing so great as *Salomé* to show for it.

London, September 1914.

*A Wo/Man of No Importance: Victorian literature, queer subculture and the Criminal
Law Amendment Act 1885*

As Michael Mason noted in *The Making of Victorian Sexuality*, the latter half of the 19th century was a time of institutional panic about various sexual practices and trends, including divorce, rape, prostitution, sodomy and cross-dressing.³⁴ The judge's remarks on Campbell and Challis pointed towards two major changes in how the authorities perceived the threat that sexual diversity posed to British society, and how they would tackle it. Firstly, their concern shifted from individual cross-dressers who frequented notorious urban areas, towards anxieties about sodomite networks, of which men in 'female attire' seemed the most visible face. Secondly, they passed an ambiguous law to criminalise a wider range of practices, as the courts realised their efforts to keep 'vice' out of the public eye were futile, and decided instead to make an example of people deemed likely to corrupt others. It is this pivot, which took place over 25 years, that forms the basis of my second story, *A Wo/Man of No Importance* – which draws heavily on the sexual scandals of late 19th century Britain, and takes place as the conflict between the state and the Victorian queer *demi-monde* reached a brutally repressive head.

In 1861, the death penalty for sodomy was replaced by ten years' imprisonment, but no other sexual behaviours were outlawed before cross-dressers Ernest 'Stella' Boulton and Frederick 'Fanny' Park were arrested outside the Strand Theatre in April 1870, having been tracked by the Metropolitan Police for months. Amidst unprecedented public and press interest, generated in part by Boulton's association with the Liberal MP, Lord Arthur Clinton, the police examined the pair for evidence of sodomy; when that proved inconclusive, they were charged with 'conspiring to incite others to commit unnatural offences'. The evidence for the prosecution consisted of little more than a few letters between Boulton, Park and a handful of other men, and some dresses found when the police raided 13 Wakefield Street, London, where Boulton and Park – who were well-known female impersonators – stored their theatrical inventory.

Boulton and Park's trial, held in May 1871, remains the most high-profile of any cross-dressers in British history, and the most significant of any trans people until the one involving April Ashley a century later. It collapsed amidst recriminations about the lack

of legislation by which they could be convicted; the Lord Chief Justice lamented that their conduct was “an outrage upon public decency ... not to be tolerated even when it is done as a mere frolic and amusement; it ... deserves summary and severe punishment ... And if the law as it is cannot reach it, then it ought to be the subject of legislation, and probably ... corporal punishment.”³⁵ In 1885, the Criminal Law Amendment Act was passed, outlawing acts of ‘gross indecency’; Wilde’s subsequent imprisonment under this law was a vital point in the ‘reverse discourse’ theorised in Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*, in which queer identities became constituted by state oppression, and in tactics to resist, subvert or escape it. ‘Homosexuality,’ he argued, ‘began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or “naturalness” be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified.’³⁶ Trans identities were initially constituted through a similar process, their original definitions emerging from included the development of sexology, which aimed to understand minorities of gender and sexuality as a step towards organising against the oppression of these minorities – a process that was underway by 1895, and which feeds into my story.

Unlike the cross-dressing cases that inform *A Night at the Theatre*, all this is well documented. Queer historians have studied the effects of the 1885 Act, and the life and work of Oscar Wilde, for decades; recently, Boulton and Park have inspired a book by Neil McKenna and a play by Neil Bartlett, both of whom had previously written on Wilde. A historical study of Boulton and Park could look at what came next, and how they influenced the late Victorian period’s sexual subculture, appearing (for example) as characters in the anonymous pornographic novel *Sins of the Cities of the Plain* (1881). A study of Wilde could look at how Boulton and Park inspired him: he named Cecil Graham in *Lady Windermere’s Fan* (1892) after the name Boulton gave the police on his arrest³⁷, and attempted a similar tactic to theirs when he prosecuted the Marquis of Queensbury for libel for calling him a ‘posing somdomite’ [*sic*], trying to present his works in an aesthetic rather than moral context – a tactic that failed because, unlike in 1871, when the court were not prepared to admit to understanding the subtexts to Boulton and Park’s letters, Queensbury’s lawyers pressed Wilde on the underlying meanings of his work before presenting several male prostitutes who were prepared to testify against him. So – why did I turn instead to fiction?

As with the cross-dressers detailed in Cocks' book, this discourse of trials and legislation has almost exclusively been told as a gay male story. This is understandable, especially as far as Wilde is concerned, but *The Times* noted that Boulton and Park were arrested 'upon the charge of wearing women's clothes... for a supposed felonious purpose' and that the sensation around them was probably caused by 'the notoriety acquired by certain young men who, for years past, have been ... visiting places of public resort in female attire'.³⁸ In the absence of any evidence of sodomy, it was their cross-dressing, and the motivations behind it, that was discussed most extensively in court. In addition, Alfred Taylor – a male brothel owner who was convicted alongside Wilde – had previously been arrested, with female impersonator Arthur Marling, for wearing women's clothes to John Preston's club on Fitzroy Street in 1894, and the police found female attire on raiding his house before the Wilde trial.³⁹ Little is known about Taylor's life, so rather than use *him* as the main character and speculate about his reasons for cross-dressing, I created a new character, Arthur Parr, whose biography and interests serve to draw together the proto-trans aspects of this discourse, and pull them to the surface.

Like *A Night at the Theatre*, *A Wo/Man of No Importance* is presented as a 'rediscovered' text that 'recounts events around the Oscar Wilde trial and London's decadent literary and artistic circles'.⁴⁰ Its author is unknown, but probably connected to *The Yellow Book*, a periodical published in London in 1894-1897, and influenced by illicit French *fin-de-siècle* fiction. It is dated 1914, but 'there is no evidence ... that it was ever circulated, as doing so could have meant its publisher being charged with distributing obscene material'.⁴¹ The preamble, putting the story into context for contemporary readers, also says there is 'little proof' that Parr existed, although a ten-year-old recorded in Manchester in the 1881 census is 'most likely' him.⁴²

Many of the details of Parr's narrative map onto real people, or reference parts of their lives. Indeed, every historical detail in *A Wo/Man of No Importance* is real and verifiable, *apart* from those concerning Parr's actions. Even then, everything Parr *reads*, from German sexologist Richard Krafft-Ebing's case study 'about a woman with a morbid aversion to female attire' to the pornographic novel *Gynecocracy* (1893) 'about a young man forced into cross-sexed servitude', existed.⁴³ So did Edward Hamblar and Luke Limner, fined for public cross-dressing in 1889 and 1891, respectively, and mentioned by

others as cautionary examples.⁴⁴ As with the Travers case, I found their stories in digital archives, although more of my historical material came from 20th and 21st century books about Victorian sexuality or literature than from primary sources. It is also true that Boulton launched a female impersonation career in New York after 1871, although I don't know if Wilde or the *Yellow Book* crowd were aware at the time.

An aspiring writer, Parr wants to launch his career and find (or create) a safe space to cross-dress. (These were my aims in my early twenties; I used my emotional memories as a basis for Parr's responses to those who frustrate him.) He feels he can accomplish both goals by moving to London and meeting the editors of *The Yellow Book*, and the authors and artists associated with it, in whose work he sees sexually charged subtexts. Above all, he hopes to meet Wilde, despite Wilde's publicly-stated disdain for *The Yellow Book*; Parr shares Wilde's obsession with Boulton and Park, being 'pleased with himself for identifying ... a brilliant allusion in *The Importance of Being Earnest*', telling friends that "'If Boulton is 'Ernest' then he walks free; if she's 'Stella' then she goes to gaol'".⁴⁵ Wilde's failed libel trial and subsequent arrest mean that Parr cannot get close to Wilde, and instead, he befriends Aubrey Beardsley – one of the few *Yellow Book* contributors who does not look down on his working-class Mancunian accent, his youthful impetuosity and his innate need to cross-dress – and meets Edward Carpenter and Havelock Ellis, who were part of the wave of British activists and sexologists who began meeting and publishing in the 1880s, and who were both close to London literary circles.

Using the concept of the time, Parr comes to identify as an 'invert' – someone who physically belongs to one sex but psychologically to the other – and this makes the publishers, writers and sexologists nervous: he is too unsubtle about his inclinations, and too determined to write about and organise drag balls, even as the Wilde trial unfolds, and the political climate becomes more restrictive. First, he submits a short story to *The Yellow Book* about 'a magnificent festival, where men became women and became men', which the editors decline for fear of a scandal like that caused by Wilde's *Dorian Gray*.⁴⁶ (The narrator recalls Parr 'was much encouraged by Beardsley', whose romantic novel *Under the Hill* was also withheld at the time.⁴⁷) Furious, Parr decides instead to organise a drag ball, in a private space but with many attendees, like the one at the Temperance Hall in Hulme, Manchester in September 1880. Discussing the incident at a *Yellow Book*

dinner, Parr is aware that 47 men – 22 in ‘female attire’ – were arrested there, but states his belief that copying some of their security measures (including their use of a blind pianist) and strengthening others will prevent a raid, or allow an escape if that fails.⁴⁸

Responding to his contemporaries, who fear that his actions will provoke a clampdown on their entire group (especially after it is reported, wrongly, that Wilde carried *The Yellow Book* on his arrest), Parr cites both the Attorney General’s conclusion that Boulton and Park’s conviction “would inflict a stain upon the national character”⁴⁹ and the Temperance Hall defendants’ argument that to convict them of ‘a vice so hateful that it was unnameable among Christians’ threatened to shame all Manchester, which persuaded the judge to issue only a fine.⁵⁰ Parr’s determination is so strong that he ignores repeated warnings about how the 1885 Act has made such defences untenable, and sure enough, in the trial at my story’s climax, the judge insists that in the light of Wilde and Taylor’s convictions, ‘decent men’ can no longer ignore such ‘despicable vice’, neither as ‘indecent but youthful folly’ (the defence that works for Travers, Goldsand and Boulton and Park), nor under the guise of theatre, literature or art’.⁵¹

Like Wilde, my protagonist is convicted as much because of his writing as his behaviour. He ignores *The Yellow Book* editors’ advice to destroy his manuscript, and after a raid on his house, it is used as a crucial piece of evidence against him and strengthens the judge’s resolve to pass the strongest possible sentence – two years with hard labour, perhaps because he has the potential to corrupt all British society with his seditious writing.⁵² Parr’s final – and greatest – tragedy is that he leaves no legacy. His writing is suppressed, and lost; the media, feeling that the public will not (and should not) want to hear of another case like Wilde’s, give him no coverage; no publisher will touch him on his release; the ‘hard labour’ breaks him even more than Wilde, and he does not write anything like *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* or *De Profundis* in prison. On his release, he finally gets to the United States, where he might live anonymously, like Taylor, or reinvent himself, like Boulton; but instead, he soon dies, mortally wounded by his gaol sentence, becoming an avatar of the people who repressed themselves because of the 1885 Act, fled the United Kingdom, or whose convictions did not inspire historians, authors or activists in the same way as Wilde’s. Sexological efforts to change the climate for everyone – including proto-trans people – targeted under the Act are discussed in my next story.

Reconfiguration

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Havelock Ellis, *Eonism* and Sexual Inversion: The emergence of female-to-male culture in inter-war Britain

This article documents a case history recently discovered in the archive of Havelock Ellis (1859-1939), related to Eonism (1928) but not included in his published text. It incorporates some of Ellis's letters (of which he kept copies), as well Ellis's notes on several conversations with an individual known only as R.

Introduction

Although his work is no longer widely read, Havelock Ellis remains one of the most important figures in the history of British sexology. As well as working towards a greater understanding of homosexuality amidst the repression caused by the Criminal Law Amendment Act 1885 and conviction of Oscar Wilde, Ellis was the first to take what we now call transgender behaviour seriously. German sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld made his influential distinction between gender variance and homosexuality in *The Transvestites: The Erotic Desire to Cross-Dress* (1910); eighteen years later, Ellis published *Eonism*, the first British book on the subject, as part of his six-volume *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*.

Believing that cross-gender behaviour sprang from an identification with, and imitation of an object of desire, Ellis coined 'Eonism' after French spy, soldier, and diplomat Chevalier d'Éon, who lived in London as a woman from 1777 to 1810, and sought autobiographical testimonies to support his thesis. Completed as Hirschfeld's colleagues at the Institute of Sexual Science in Berlin were working towards the first sex

reassignment surgeries, *Eonism* opened with a curiously timid reiteration of Hirschfeld's pioneering distinction, explaining that 'Many years ago, when exploring the phenomenon of sexual inversion [*in Sexual Inversion [1898] and Sexo-Aesthetic Inversion (1913)*] I was puzzled by occasional cases ... of people who took pleasure in behaving and dressing like the opposite sex and yet were not sexually inverted.'⁶ The text focused on cross-dressers for whom there was 'usually no real primary inversion [*and*] no true fetichism [*sic*]' about clothing, focusing mainly on its subjects' attitudes to gender.⁷

Ellis remained convinced that 'homosexuality always seems primary' in female-to-male cross-dressers,⁸ which may account for the lack of female-to-male voices in *Eonism*. The published volume included a brief discussion of British Army surgeon James Miranda Barry (1795-1865), found after death to have been known as female in childhood, and who apparently gave 'no indication of any sexual tendency ... whether heterosexual or homosexual'⁹; it featured just one living female Eonist, who identified as a man only in dreams. Recent research into Ellis's papers, given by his adopted son François Lafitte to the British Library in 1988, has unearthed a far more complex study of a female-to-male individual, which did not make it into the final text, nor into Ellis's statements of support for Radclyffe Hall's novel *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) when it became the subject of an obscenity trial. Although he then published several more *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, as well as his autobiography, Ellis did not return to the subject of 'Eonism' or the intricacies of female-to-male behaviour during the final decade of his life, for reasons that shall be explored in this paper.

⁶ Ellis, H. (1936) 'Eonism and Other Supplementary Studies' in *Studies in the Psychology of Sex, Vol. III, Part Two*. New York: Random House, p1.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p11.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p1.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p6.

Ellis and R.

On 4 February 1927, Ellis wrote to fellow sexologist Dr Norman Haire,¹⁰ asking for help in finding ‘more female Eonists ... who want to dress as, or be like men’ to test his theory ‘from the opposite direction’ and help him ‘to establish whether medical or psychological support would be most appropriate’. He wrote: ‘I am more sympathetic to Dr. Hirschfeld’s overall approach’ (of asking people about their impulses and drawing conclusions from their statements) than that of Krafft-Ebing,¹¹ ‘who believed cross-dressing a step ‘on the road to insanity’’ (and treated any correspondence on the matter accordingly), ‘so you can assure anyone whom you refer to me that they will be met with the utmost sensitivity.’¹²

Haire sent ‘the daughter of a friend in the medical profession, living in south Wales’ – this friend being a doctor, employed at St Mary’s Hospital in Paddington, who had helped Haire to settle after his move from Australia to London. Haire expressed doubt over whether this person would be suitable, however, as ‘she is inclined mainly towards women’, although he added that ‘she has been in a long-term relationship with a man ... so may still be of interest’.¹³ This *was* of interest – perhaps *because* of this sexual complexity, which differed from the other female-to-male people or female inverters who Ellis had met. He may not have known many: Ellis used just six lesbian case histories in *Sexual Inversion*.¹⁴

¹⁰ Norman Haire, born Norman Zions (1892-1952) – one of Britain’s most prominent inter-war sexologists.

¹¹ Richard von Krafft-Ebing (1840-1902), Austro-German psychiatrist, and author of *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886). Although this book was aimed at psychiatrists, physicians, and judges, it popularised the terms ‘Sadism’ and ‘Masochism’, although Freud’s idea that homosexuality was a psychological phenomenon eclipsed his theory of it as a biological anomaly.

¹² Ellis to Haire, 4 February 1927.

¹³ Haire to Ellis, 9 February 1927.

¹⁴ Grosskurth, P. (1980) *Havelock Ellis: A Biography*. London: Allen Lane, p188.

Ellis's first notes on this daughter, recorded only as 'R.' are dated 16 March 1927.¹⁵ They are part of a file that includes his correspondence with Haire, records on his own contributions to the dialogue (sometimes fully written up in the first person, in which case they are presented here as such; sometimes in a more fragmentary form, in which they are worked in my narration) and direct transcripts of R.'s testimony, starting with the below:

"I was born in Cardiff, twenty-nine years ago, to parents who already had a three-year-old son, Clifford, and loved us both dearly. My father was a doctor, discussed in our area in the highest regard, and he met my mother when she was working as a medical secretary – she left her job when Cliff was born to devote herself to raising a family. My father worked long hours, and would sometimes go back to London, or elsewhere, for conferences, so I spent far more time with my mother, who took Cliff and me to Church every Sunday, and often read to me. My favourites were always the adventure stories that my father had bought for Cliff; I loved to imagine myself as the sea-captains or explorers in those books.

"Soon, I found that I wanted to dress like these characters, rather than like my father. He wanted Cliff to become a doctor too, and my parents gave him an education not just in medicine, but also the arts. They were very proud that he was accepted into school at Cowbridge. Whenever I could, I wore his clothes – not just his uniform, although I wished I could have the schooling that he did, especially when I tried on his tie and blazer – but also his shirts and trousers. As a boy, I called myself Robert, and invented a life for myself, where I went to university, and then to sea, exploring

¹⁵ All attempts to trace R. have, thus far, been unsuccessful. There is only one 'Clifford' listed as having died at Gallipoli with the South Wales Borderers, and he had no sisters, so it is likely that Ellis (or R.) used a pseudonym to avoid detection. A search of the 1901, 1911 and 1921 censuses has not yielded anyone whose name begins with R. who fits the details in this case history, and so R.'s identity will probably remain a mystery. (Perhaps Ellis chose to use 'R.' as a coded reference to Radclyffe Hall – or, just as likely, to R's youthful choice of 'Robert'.) Although it may be an anachronism, we have opted for the gender-neutral pronoun *they* (singular) to describe R.

the world with gay abandon. One time, my father came home early from watching a rugby match, and found me dressed as Robert. I thought he would be furious, but he just laughed and told that those clothes weren't for me. I think he thought I was just having some harmless fun."

Ellis's transcript of R.'s dialogue included his interjections, which were mostly brief questions. He noted that he asked what R. was doing at this moment. When R. replied that "I can't really remember. Having a day-dream about fighting pirates, I think," Ellis pointed out that "It's not unusual for little girls to want to be boys" and asked if R. did, as a child.

"It was merely a fantasy. Of course, I imagined what life might be like if I were to grow into a man - and why not fantasise about the kind of man in those *Boy's Own* stories?"

"You admired the swash-buckling types, rather than the ones with hum-drum jobs?" asked Ellis. R. laughed, affirmatively. "Were those the kind of people you were attracted towards? Or did you imagine yourself as an adventurer with a beautiful wife?"

"I was too young to think about anything like that! In my fantasies, I was always in the company of men, crossing the Arctic or captaining a ship towards uncharted lands. My mother detested it when I acted like a young man - we would have fearful rows about the length of my hair, which I always wanted cut short. Eventually, I won that argument, but then my breasts started to develop, and I had bigger problems than what was on my head. I often grew angry, quickly, over very little, and she would tell me that wasn't how young ladies were supposed to behave, which just made it worse. At this point, I began to dream not only about being a man, but also about a young lady, Marianne, the daughter of my father's partner at his practice. She looked like a heroine from an

Austen novel – flowing, strawberry-blonde hair and the most feminine figure – and as soon as we met, I realised that everything I didn’t want to be, I found desirable.”

Ellis asked about dreams: if R. was “a man or a woman” in them, and if Marianne ever appeared.

“It was never clear ... I was in my body, and very aware of that, but never of the clothes I was wearing, and in fact the whole world around me felt drained of colour and devoid of sound, as if I were trapped in a moving picture. I would be on a train, alone, looking for the conductor, as I feared that I had missed my stop. Whichever way I approached, his back was turned, and nothing persuaded him to face me. The train only moved faster, whistling as it hurtled through our stop, and I caught just a glimpse of Marianne sitting on the platform, looking as alone as I felt, but in her summer finery, her hair the most brilliant auburn, and usually, I woke up before the whistle blew and the engine smashed into a bricked-up tunnel.”

Ellis did not analyse this dream, saying only that its meaning was “rather obvious”. Instead, he asked if R. had any dreams of being “more masculine”, or of intimacy with Marianne – and if they tended to occur simultaneously.

“Yes, but not as often as I wished. Just once, a fragment of a wedding. I have never cursed my body more for removing me from a fantasy as I did in that moment, in the middle of the night, and of course when I got back to sleep, it was unrecoverable ... It was magnificent, but always so miserably fleeting.”

‘I told R. that the only other woman I had spoken to [*about Eonism*] experienced erotic dreams from the onset of sexual life, where she was a young man, making love to a

woman,’ notes Ellis in a letter to Haire.¹⁶ This was the only comparable case history that made the final text: ‘a Welshwoman, 29 years of age, married two years since’ who was ‘attractive to men, and attracted to them’, and found the idea of homosexual affairs abhorrent.¹⁷ Her husband ‘had not even been aware that [*she*] needed arousing, or that anything beyond penetration and ejaculation was required’; once he realised that she also had erotic needs, learned to satisfy her ‘almost, if not quite’ as much as these dream sequences.¹⁸ Ellis already sensed that R.’s interest in women could not be dismissed so easily, privately lamenting his own ‘inability to feel such strong and healthy passions’,¹⁹ but asked “about how often these feelings extend into your waking hours”. As Ellis anticipated, R. emphatically rejected his implication that these desires sprang from a need for satisfaction from a male lover, or were confined to dreams:

“I don’t know why I felt like this – still feeling in my mind that I would like to meet a man and marry, and sometimes meeting men who I genuinely considered handsome, but in my heart, knowing that such a life was categorically not for me. My parents, my grandparents and my brother did not seem to feel this way, and I often wished that I could feel as comfortable as my mother, or Marianne – I wanted to tell her how much I adored her, but it always felt doomed. In any case, the news that Cliff had been killed at Gallipoli soon overshadowed this. My dreams intensified: I found myself on the front, rushing towards the German guns, a man not unlike my brother, or our friends in the South Wales Borderers who died with him, bolting awake when the bullet hit my heart ... And I wondered if my desire to be a man was a wish to replace him, my desire for Marianne a wish to have the family that he might have ... and then I remembered that those dreams had been there for years.”

¹⁶ Ellis to Haire, 21 March 1927.

¹⁷ Ellis, *Eonism*, p37.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p40.

¹⁹ Ellis to Haire, 21 March 1927.

R.'s testimony anticipated and refuted Ellis's previously-recorded belief that 'inversion' was congenital, but Ellis still felt that R's inclinations might fit his Eonist paradigm, although he was careful not to play his hand too quickly, or too forcefully; in another letter to Haire, he confessed that 'R. is throwing up some fascinating challenges [*to his overall theory*] but may yet lead me to discover another sub-category of Eonist, rather than simply following the paths of Dr. Hirschfeld and co.'²⁰ With his customary gentleness, Ellis encouraged R. to talk about life after the end of the conflict. He was rewarded with far greater openness from his analysand:

"Cliff's death made me feel that I should liberate myself as much as possible, because one never knows what's coming next. But as soon as I found the courage to tell Marianne how I felt, she said that she had fallen in love with a young doctor – the kind of handsome, self-assured fellow I had come to envy more than anyone – and soon they were engaged. There were a few women with whom I had passing relations, usually people I met through my work as a medical secretary. They never lasted longer than a couple of nights, or a couple of weeks, but relations nonetheless. They would start with a friendly but conventional greeting, glances that lasted just a little too long, an awkward smile returned with an enthusiastic one, jubilant agreements to meet in the little coffee shop at the station, long walks and then furtive encounters at whoever's home was empty, and bitterly, we found that often, nobody's home was ... They fell apart for different reasons, greater than the lack of a room: we worried about what would happen if our families or friends found out, and our shared anxieties pushed us apart; they were more interested in men and didn't take me so seriously. I still longed for Marianne, even though I knew it was impossible, as I didn't even see her any more – I think she, or her family, knew how I felt about her, and kept her away from me. I

²⁰ Ellis to Haire, 28 March 1927.

struggled to sleep every night, broken, and fearful of how my loss would express itself in my nightmares.

“My parents wanted me to marry and have children – even more so after we lost Cliff. They tried to find me a suitor – another family friend’s son, Gwyn, five years my senior, who had returned from the war, which had interrupted his Classics degree at Oxford. They introduced us over dinner, and I could see what was happening straight away – my mother had constantly been asking me when I might meet a man and start a family. I could not find the heart to tell her the truth, so she kept pushing, and Gwyn was a frequent visitor, wanting to take me to balls, treat me to expensive meals and so on. I kept up the charade for months, trying to convince myself that I could love him, but I could not bear to let him touch me. After a couple of cold, fumbling attempts, I began to wonder if he too might have been an invert, but I never wanted to ask, of course. We slept in separate beds whenever we had to spend the night together: it was my suggestion, but he never challenged it, and although we never raised it, I suspected that he felt the same way about things between us as I did: a kind, courteous friendship that was, at its heart, empty.

“At the same time, I began to think less about Marianne, and more of how I could change this situation, and yet how disappointed my parents would feel once they knew that I would not give them grandchildren. I met another woman, Clare, who had recently moved from London to Cardiff to work for the Labour Party. She told me about balls in London where women could meet and dance together, how her friends would sometimes go to Paris or Berlin where it was easier to be honest about who they loved, and showed me some magazines that she kept hidden in her little apartment in Park Place. Clare made me forget about Marianne – she was beautiful in the same feminine way but more open with her emotions, helping me to express myself too. When Gwyn was away, she took me to London and we danced together. I borrowed a suit from Richard, a male invert that she knew. I felt and looked resplendent in traditional black tie, and that one night of waltzing with Clare in her beautiful ballgown, me taking the lead and then staying at Richard’s house and strapping something to my waist so that I could make love to her. For both of us, it was heaven,

for me because I'd never had the chance to be 'the man' with a woman before, and for her because she had never found anyone who had wanted to do that with her ... We kept meeting whenever we could, asking each other if there was any way that we could make a life together, maybe in Wales. Soon, the only time I would only think about Gwyn was when Clare and I talked of how I might tell him and my family about what I really wanted to do, wondering how much easier it would be if I *were* Gwyn, and if a lady like Clare were taken with me ... And that was when Gwyn proposed to me.

"From the way our conversation went, I immediately realised that I was wrong to think that Gwyn was an invert. I hesitated, and the look in his eyes betrayed him. I saw this desperation, a loneliness, because he had never met a woman who listened to him, who understood him, and over the time we'd spent, I had come to see him as a very dear friend. I'd become a confidante for him, and maybe that was more important for him than anything else, but for me, that didn't mean love. As his face broke into a half-smile, I just said "I can't". I tried to embrace him, hoping that he would realise that it wasn't *him*, but he ran out of the room, weeping. Immediately, my thoughts turned to my parents, and how I would explain.

"I didn't have to, though. When the subject came up, my mother said: "It's Clare, isn't it?" I nodded, and she said, "I knew it," more in resignation than anger. "I can't help it," I told her, and I went to see Clare, staying at her house for several days."

As R. was obviously directing the exchange towards the idea – disavowed by both Hirschfeld and Ellis – that same-sex desire was necessarily linked with cross-gender behaviour, Ellis suspected that R. had a background in sexology, or at least a working knowledge of it. In a letter to Haire, Ellis wondered if he would be better off talking to people with no prior interest in the field. He acknowledged, however, that he did not have the networks to facilitate this, and relying on sexologists to provide his case studies was

always like to give him such a problem. He also confessed that ‘R. is clinging, steadfastly, to my old idea of the ‘invert’, despite what I quite clearly see as identification with male objects of desire. The more I probe, the more R. asserts a sense of being psychologically and sexually masculine – that is, drawn romantically towards women – and I am wondering if I (and Dr. Hirschfeld, for that matter) have set up our excavations in the wrong place.’²¹

Haire’s response was (characteristically) stern, telling Ellis that ‘If you structure your enquiries around your anxieties over keeping up with the Germans, then your methodology will prove unsound. Respond to your *patient*, who is surely complex enough to be interesting, regardless of your competitors, and re-evaluate your concepts accordingly. Enquiring into my dialogue with R. may be rewarding for you.’²²

At Haire’s suggestion, Ellis asked questions about R.’s acquaintance with Haire, and about how much R. knew of his own previous works, and of sexology and psychoanalysis in general:

“Once she had calmed down, my mother suggested I see a psychoanalyst. We found someone in Bristol, but I soon realised that this was not for me. *Everything* came back to my mother – his speculation about *her* being inverted, my desire to replace my father, or my brother, my jealousy of their anatomy, all that nonsense. After lots of time and money, my father said that I should meet his friend – Dr. Haire. After all, my father had a passing interest in sexology – he kept a few works in his library, and on my first visit, Dr. Haire lent me a copy of *Sexual Inversion* so I could read about other women like me.”²³

²¹ Ellis to Haire, 24 April 1927.

²² Haire to Ellis, 30 April 1927.

²³ Note that Hirschfeld’s *Transvestites* was not translated into English until 1991.

“I told Dr. Haire that I had always been drawn towards women – nervously, as the psychoanalyst had talked of perversion and pathology, and I had left his care worried about what might happen to me. Dr. Haire told me to relax – it was not illegal for women to love each other – but he understood that just because the law does not pay much attention to us, that does not always mean that society will be forgiving. Being open about it might cost me my family, my job, or my social standing, he said, and that would make life difficult even if I had support from Clare, and from her friends that I had met in London.

“I told Dr. Haire that I thought all this was especially cruel as I had never really felt like a woman. He asked what I meant, and I said that I had never liked doing all the things that women are supposed to do – wearing dresses, making the home, and so forth. ‘Just because you don’t feel drawn to ‘the feminine’ doesn’t mean that you’re not a woman’, he said, and told me to elaborate. I told him about how Clare liked it when I penetrated her, and was happy for me to keep my hair short and go around in trousers, but that she wanted to be with a woman. Dressing in the manner I did – *feeling* the manner I did – didn’t mean that I wasn’t a woman, she insisted. I wondered how much she loved me for my mind, especially as she never seemed too excited about the poetry that I wrote, and Dr. Haire told me to think more about my body. Was my discomfort with being a woman about my sex? *Did* I have ‘penis envy’? If so, why? How long had I felt like this, beyond my youthful dressing-up?

“I couldn’t separate that childish behaviour – which Dr. Haire said was very common in little girls, most of whom don’t grow up to be inverters – from those dreams that I mentioned, my desire for Marianne, for Clare and those other women, or from my aversion to being seen or treated like a lady. I liked the magazines that Clare had shown me – certainly, I saw more of myself there than anywhere else, but still, I never felt like the women in their pages, no matter how I tried. I began to wonder: was I drawn to men after all? As well as women? At this point, Dr. Haire said that you were the best person in the country to talk to about all this, and promised to refer me.”

Ellis asked if wanting to be a man meant wanting to be the dominant partner in a lesbian relationship, and taking typically male social roles. R. said *Yes*, but Ellis sensed that R.'s 'inversion' ran deeper than a desire to adopt masculine costume and mannerisms. In *Eonism*, Ellis specified 'two main types': 'the most common', in which 'inversion is mainly confined to the sphere of clothing', and the other, 'less common but more complete, in which ... the subject so identifies [*with*] the opposite sex that he feels really to belong to that sex', albeit with 'no delusion regarding his anatomical conformation'.²⁴ Ellis asked R. which type felt most appropriate. R. insisted: "The second." He then asked, "Would you like surgery to give you a male body?" R. replied "Yes". It was a response that entangled Ellis's old and new ideas still further: for the first time, Ellis had met someone who had 'moved from psychological inversion towards *physical* inversion', but, he told Haire, he was 'still struggling for the terminology' to adequately differentiate between these desires.²⁵ His search for clarification would lead him into previously uncharted terrain – at least in his home country.

Ellis, Eonism and the demand for reassignment

More than seventy years old, Ellis now had to rethink his ideas about gender variance and sexual orientation, and how they related to each other, yet again. His 'two main types' of Eonist actually mapped closely to the 'transvestite'/'transsexual' distinction that would pre-occupy post-war sexologists, but his florid language lacked the clarity of his German counterparts, who were conducting sexological research and surgery in tandem, confirming the separation of gender and sexuality through praxis.

²⁴ Ibid., p36.

²⁵ Ellis to Haire, 16 May 1927.

Having nothing like the same *milieu*, Ellis struggled with the thought that placing gender identity *above* sexual orientation, let alone sex reassignment, would turn his categories upside-down: ‘the invert would become heterosexual’ after transition, he wrote to Haire, ‘whilst the Eonist would be homosexual’.²⁶ Ellis had no framework for a bisexual (in the contemporary sense) person such as R. – who ‘became quite excited’ when Ellis mentioned the Institute for Sexual Science’s surgical experiments. ‘I tried to manage R.’s expectations, saying that such treatments were untested, physically dangerous and prohibitively expensive,’ wrote Ellis, ‘and, of course, these expectations, if realised, could consign all my exploration of Eonism to the past, but I feel I owe it to R., and doubtless many others – as well as *myself* – to explore the possibilities, and maybe see what might be possible in the United Kingdom’.²⁷

Ellis asked Haire – who was fluent in German – about Karl M. Baer (1885-1956), a German-Israeli author, suffragette and early Zionist, who became one of the first people to undergo sex reassignment surgery, in December 1906, and was issued with a new birth certificate, legally confirming his gender.²⁸ Haire sent notes on Baer’s book, *Aus eines Mannes Mädchenjahren*, a blend of autobiography and fiction, published under an obvious pseudonym, N. O. Body, in 1907 (translated as *Memoirs of a Man’s Maiden Years* in 2005). Ellis also read about American physicist, radiologist, and author Alan L. Hart (1890-1962), who had a hysterectomy and gonadectomy at the University of Oregon Medical School, and then lived as a man.

²⁶ Ellis to Haire, 12 July 1927.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ The exact details of the operations on Baer – who was most likely intersex – have never been found. Hirschfeld was a consultant, and it is possible that documents related to Baer were destroyed when the Nazis burned down the Institute for Sexual Science in 1933.

Wondering just how much he might be able to help R., Ellis inquired into work taking place under the auspices of Hirschfeld's Berlin-based *Institut für Sexualwissenschaft* (Institute for Sexual Science). He learned that in 1916, sexologist Max Marcuse had published a paper that distinguished desire for sex reassignment surgery from other forms of cross-identification, but Ellis's notes and letters do not mention the female-to-male transvestite who apparently had his breasts and uterus removed in Berlin in 1912.²⁹ Haire gave him more information about Erwin Gohrbandt's (1890-1965) castration of Dörchen Richter in 1922, and told him the Institute was exploring vaginoplasty for male-to-female patients, drawing on 'transplantation' experiments that Austrian physiologist Eugen Steinach had done on rats and guinea pigs in the 1910s.³⁰ Ellis had written in 1913 that 'the characters in one sex must be latent in the other', and it seems that the revelation that the Institute were leading in surgery (if not endocrinology) stoked Ellis's friendly rivalry with Hirschfeld.

Whilst Ellis was conducting this research, Radclyffe Hall asked him to write an introduction to *The Well of Loneliness*. Hall described Ellis as "the greatest living authority on the tragical problem of sexual inversion" and wanted her narrative authenticated as something that 'could itself stand as an inverted case history'.³¹ Ellis obliged, and discussed Hall's manuscript with R. – a conversation that may have inspired him to say *The Well of Loneliness* presented, 'in a completely faithful and uncompromising form, one particular aspect of sexual life as it exists among us today' in

²⁹ Meyerowitz, J. (2002) *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States*. Harvard University Press: Cambridge/London, p18.

³⁰ For a fuller discussion of Steinach, see Meyerowitz, pp16-17.

³¹ Prosser, J. (1998) *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*. Columbia University Press: New York/Chichester, p157.

response to the *Sunday Express*' campaign to ban it on its publication.³² He spoke to R. about this in a new transcript, made on 19 August 1927:

"I saw more of myself in *[The Well of Loneliness]* than in any other story I've read. But I suppose the only thing that's even a little like it is *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and, well, it's not the same ... I liked the way Stephen found out about inversion from reading her father's medical books ... even if she had the chance to live in London and write novels in a way that I never did. I didn't think Stephen was happy to be in no-man's-land, and the ending make me cry³³ – I've never had the strongest of faiths but I've always felt like I was being tested, and so I have talked to God so often, asking to be like the other girls at school, and then to be like the boys at Cliff's school, or the men at father's practice ..."

Ellis asked R. about the possibility of living as a man, taking a male name and wearing men's clothes, without surgical intervention. The latter would be expensive to obtain, most likely involving a trip to Germany for an experimental procedure.

"Of course, I have often thought about living like a man, as much as possible. I would call myself Robert and dress only in clothes from a tailor, like Stephen Gordon. But I would have to start again elsewhere. How would I tell my employer that I was coming back as a man? I know that it was more common before the war, but wouldn't it be strange now for them to have a male secretary? And then there are my parents – especially my mother. I think they would conclude that I was reacting to Cliff's death, trying to replace him somehow ... And then Clare ..."

³² <http://spartacus-educational.com/Wradclyffe.htm>, accessed 10 August 2018.

³³ The novel concludes with Stephen's prayer: 'Give us also the right to our existence!' Hall, R. (1997) *The Well of Loneliness*. Virago: London, p447.

Recalling R's statement that Clare wanted 'to be with a woman', Ellis asked if any relationship could be more important than feeling content in one's own body. (His handwritten notes on the typed-up conversation made a frustrated note on his own 'impotence' and 'useless attraction to inverts' – most likely a reference to his marriage to the women's rights activist and open lesbian Edith Lees, which lasted from 1891 until Lees' death in 1916, despite the husband and wife not living in the same property.) R. said:

"Could I be happy in myself if I had to sacrifice the love of my life? Because I really fear that I would have to do so. I would have to find a completely different type of woman, who wasn't an invert but accepted that I had not always been a man. But if I *could* be completely male ..."

By now, Ellis was convinced that R.'s desires were sincere. They talked about the implications of acting upon them: the possibility of familial estrangement and being socially ostracised, as well as potential hardships in maintaining a relationship or employment. None of this was certain, Ellis insisted; people's reactions would be impossible to predict. Unlike a relationship, however, it would not be possible for R. to keep this transition secret from certain people, and so some difficult conversations became necessary. The toughest, they both knew, would be with R.'s parents. Aware that his presence would provide greater authority, R. asked Ellis if he could join them. Although he worried that this may break a boundary between the professional and personal that he had long struggled to maintain, Ellis agreed, and he sent a description of their meeting to Haire, which he kept in his case notes.

‘I travelled to Cardiff to meet R.’s mother and father, who are ageing, but not entirely set in their ways – although I worried that they would react badly to R. bringing a sexologist, and might instead want R. to try again with a psychoanalyst. As a former doctor, at least, R.’s father seemed aware that we were discussing not so much a psychological ailment as a physical one, and that any treatment would be experimental – and possibly dangerous. As anticipated, it was R.’s mother who found it hardest to acknowledge R.’s decision. At first, her accusations were aimed at her long-standing and loving husband, not only for his prolonged absences during R.’s formative years, but also for his indifference towards R.’s youthful cross-dressing and masculine self-presentation in adulthood. R. tried to convince her that this was not her husband’s fault, to little avail; instead, R.’s mother asked if Clare had “led you astray”, as it was “only natural for [*Clare*] to wish there was a man” in their relationship. This hurt R. above all else, given how difficult this subject had been to broach, and I had to answer on R.’s behalf, insisting that R.’s bodily and romantic desires were not inherently linked.

It was only when I insisted that R.’s desires were not as unusual as they might seem that R.’s mother broke down in tears of self-recrimination: bitter regrets about not raising R. to be more feminine, and that she was not able to persuade R. to marry Gwyn, who, she said, “would have supported you for life”. In the silence that followed – just a moment, but one that felt like an age – she looked up and said, “Dear Lord, you have already taken my son ...” and, through her tears, “why are you taking my daughter as well?” She refused her husband’s hand, and as R. rushed towards the bathroom, I knew I had to interject.

I decided that first, I would assure her that other people had undergone such procedures and not just survived, but lived fuller, richer lives as a result. I praised R.’s bravery, and

clarity of decision-making – nobody would undertake this, I said, unless they were completely certain in their decision. The cause might remain the subject of speculation, I continued, but that is for the sexologists. For everyone else in R.’s life, it would be best to offer support; “I appreciate that it might be daunting, but if you can find that in your heart,” I told R.’s mother, “you will be rewarded with a level of love and kindness that you could never previously have imagined. There is nothing more I can add, but I wish you every happiness.”³⁴

Ultimately, Ellis’s intervention worked. He told Haire that while their relationship did not become as warm as they had hoped, R. avoided permanent estrangement from their family – partly because Ellis promised not to publish anything that would make them identifiable.

Having previously tried to raise his patient’s hopes of getting surgery, Ellis spent more time exploring the possibility of achieving it in Britain, discussing the latest innovations in Germany with Haire in his letters.³⁵ The expertise that might have allowed this was not far off: South African-born surgeon Lennox Broster, based at Charing Cross Hospital, told Ellis that he had recently operated on a fifteen-year-old, raised as female, who had experienced virilisation – that is, deepening of the voice, clitoral enlargement and increased muscle strength.³⁶ Broster removed an enlarged adrenal gland but realised that its size was caused not by a tumour, but hyperplasia (an increase in organic tissue from cell proliferation). Broster continued his work on hyperplasia but also pioneered hormonal and surgical treatment to intersex patients – however, these breakthroughs were

³⁴ Ellis to Haire, 16 September 1927.

³⁵ Ellis to Haire, 3 October 1927.

³⁶ Broster to Ellis, 23 October 1927.

not made for nearly a decade. In 1936, Broster's operations on British women's champion javelin-thrower and shot-putter Mark Weston, who was assigned female at birth, became global news. Weston was intersex; there is no evidence that Broster worked with transsexual people. However, Ellis's suggestion that R. meet Broster to discuss what might be possible only made matters more complicated, as the final transcript of R.'s testimony, dated 18 July 1928, makes clear:

"I made dinner for Clare and told her that I had something serious to tell her. She looked aghast: I think she thought I wanted to end things. So, I opened by saying, "I hope you can come with me ..." and then I struggled to find the words. Finally, I managed to utter: "I've spoken to a surgeon ..." And I watched her eyes, expecting them to fill with tears, but she hadn't yet understood what I was saying, and I thought I should retreat. As I hesitated, she asked why.

"I said I couldn't keep lying to everyone. She still didn't know what I meant. "His name is Dr. Broster ... He's looking at how to help women ... who feel like ... they should be ... men." Now I saw a reaction: a strange mixture of anger, fear, and sadness, like she was staring at someone who had killed the woman she loved. In a sense, she was. "Can ... can they even do that?" she asked. "Not yet," I said. "But they can make the body more comfortable." She asked what I meant. I said they could stop me bleeding, and give me a man's chest, if nothing else ... And she said that she had never wanted to be with a man, not once. As I anticipated, she was giving me a clear choice.

"But what if I could be a man in public and a woman in private? It wasn't what I wanted, I said, but maybe there was a way of compromising, especially as Dr. Broster said that he didn't know if full surgery might be possible during my life ... But it was too late; those words had left my lips. Clare said she needed time to think, but I don't know why, I could see that her mind was already set. I went home, and wept, wondering what my parents would say; I did not see Clare for several days,

and when I did, she told me that she no longer felt the same about me. Not just because of what I had said, but because I didn't discuss it with her before I saw Dr. Broster ..."

With Ellis's help, R. planned for a new life. We know from another letter to Haire that R. continued work as a medical secretary and saved up for a hysterectomy, gonadectomy and mastectomy,³⁷ but Ellis's notes and letters do not record any attempt to have phalloplasty. There was no suggestion that such a procedure would be possible any time soon: it was only after the war that Michael Dillon became the first transsexual man to undergo such a procedure. Ellis's final notes record that R. had the planned surgeries at an unnamed hospital – most likely Charing Cross – and then moved to Rhyl, living as a man, finding work at a library and, as far as we can tell, no longer being involved with the sexological world.

By the end, Ellis felt that he had become far too entangled with R.'s personal life. He had gone far beyond the kind of detached observation and analysis that characterised his *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, but told Haire that 'while I may have over-stepped the mark, both in my talk with R.'s parents and in my conviction that R. could help me to move well beyond Dr. Hirschfeld's insights ... I have few regrets about providing such assistance to R., and if time were not so pressing, I would readily do so again, although without investing so much hope of confirming my theory of 'Eonism'.'³⁸ However, there is no mention in Ellis's archives of any serious attempt to return to the subject of gender variance in any papers relating to the final decade of his life. He might have become even more important to British transgender history had he done so, but by this point,

³⁷ Ellis to Haire, 4 September 1928.

³⁸ Ellis to Haire, 18 September 1928.

Grosskurth suggests, he realised that his youthful aim of solving the many problems of human sexual behaviour was beyond him (and, realistically, any one individual).³⁹

Perhaps, too, Ellis did not want the kind of attention that had come with *Sexual Inversion*. He was called as the star witness in the obscenity trial pursued against *The Well of Loneliness* in November 1928, around the same time as *Eonism* was published. Trying to avoid becoming too closely associated with the subject of homosexuality or ‘gross indecency’, Ellis pulled out of the Hall trial. Haire replaced Ellis in the witness box and argued (contrary to what R. had agreed with Ellis in private) that homosexuality was congenital, and that one could no more ‘catch’ it by reading books than one could contract syphilis in this manner.

A greater problem for Ellis, though, was that R.’s case stretched his Eonist categorisations past their limit. He needed to refine his second main type – those who felt they belonged to the ‘opposite’ sex – to include people who identified so strongly with the ‘opposite sex’ that they sought corrective surgery. In his semi-retirement, Ellis knew he would not be able to interview many people in order to formulate a theory of *why* they pursued this medical intervention, and rather than introduce this complication into *Eonism*, he merely acknowledged the five types of ‘transvestite’ identified in Hirschfeld’s earlier work and then focused almost exclusively on male-to-female cross-dressers in his published text.⁴⁰

Certainly, it is a shame that Ellis’s previous assertion that the physiological characteristics of one sex were latent in the other – proved right by the reassignment surgeries that took

³⁹ Grosskurth, p. xv.

⁴⁰ Ellis, *Eonism*, p10. Hirschfeld died in 1935, four years before Ellis, in exile in France after the Nazis destroyed the Institute for Sexual Science.

place in the decades either side of his death – did not form the basis of *Eonism*. It is also regrettable that he was not able to further develop the idea that different gender expressions can be formed as much by social circumstances (be they within the family, or wider society) as by innate desires. Consequently, there was no school based on Ellis's ideas about gender identity, and the concept of 'Eonism' never gained significant currency. Hirschfeld's research into gender variance was abruptly terminated in May 1933, when the Nazis attacked the Institute for Sexual Science and burned its library, and Hirschfeld died in exile two years later. Ellis lived until 1939, spending the last decade of his life writing about the idea of obscenity and, suffering from ill health, collecting his essays into volumes for posterity. Perhaps he intended to write separately about R., as suggested by the fact that he kept these notes on file, but I can find no evidence of him formulating them into a paper, let alone a new study on the psychology of sex. The questions that R. raised for Ellis were, tantalisingly, left unanswered.

Reconfiguration: Female-to-male people and the development of sexology

Weeks after Wilde's release from prison in 1898, Havelock Ellis published *Sexual Inversion*, the first English-language book to treat 'homosexuality as neither a disease nor a crime'.⁵³ In this text, Ellis rejected German sexologist Karl Heinrich Ulrichs' 'theory of an invert as a man in whom a female soul is imprisoned', focusing instead on 'sexual instinct turned by inborn constitutional abnormality towards persons of the same sex'.⁵⁴ Ellis concluded that most male inverts acted like 'normal' men, but the female invert 'emerged as someone distinctly nervy, boyish in appearance, with a deep voice', or stereotypically masculine in demeanour.⁵⁵ In May 1898, Legitimation League secretary George Bedborough was charged with distributing obscene material for selling Ellis's book.⁵⁶ Consequently, *Sexual Inversion* was withdrawn, and never reissued in Britain; Ellis revised the text in 1902 and again in 1915, publishing both in the US in the hope of avoiding further controversy.

Despite this censorship, Ellis emerged as the pre-eminent British sexologist of the early 20th century. In his efforts to tackle the chilling effects of the Criminal Law Amendment Act, Ellis looked to Germany, where a wave of sexologists including Ulrichs, Krafft-Ebing and Magnus Hirschfeld studied 'homosexual' behaviour (a term first used in English in Charles Chaddock's translation of Krafft-Ebing in 1892⁵⁷) and cross-dressing in response to Paragraph 175, passed soon after German unification, in 1871, to criminalise same-sex intercourse. The German sexological scene differed from Britain's in two main ways. Firstly, it used case studies with living people to back up its theories and arguments, rather than cite the prevalence of homosexuality in classical Greek society as justification for its existence in the present, as Victorian British authors such as John Addington Symonds and Alfred Swaine Taylor had done.⁵⁸ (In this, the German sexologists were doubtless influenced by Freud.) Secondly, they separated gender from sexuality: Hirschfeld's *Jahrbuch für Sexuelle Zwischenstufe* (1899) advanced the idea that same-sex attraction and cross-dressing were distinct, using 'transvestite' to label those who wore the clothes of the opposite sex.⁵⁹ He developed this into the first major work on gender identity, entitled *Transvestites: The Erotic Drive to Cross-Dress* (1910), in which he argued that 'transvestism was 'a thing in itself' and 'had nothing to do with sexual orientation'.⁶⁰ He criticised psychoanalysts who had not challenged the

assumption that it did (without naming any); he also asked why cross-dressing had not yet merited a full investigation.

Ellis was the first British sexologist to respond to Hirschfeld, although his ‘full investigation’ did not appear until eighteen years later. This was *Eonism* (1928), part of his six-volume *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*; it forms the basis of my third short story, *Reconfiguration*, which aims to highlight the processes that brought trans identities into being. This is the last in a trio of ‘rediscovered’ texts – a tactic used because of the difficulties in transposing trans identities onto people who preceded them. In *A Night at the Theatre* and *A Wo/Man of No Importance*, I used fiction to draw the gender-variant subtexts of real-life stories to the surface, inventing a protagonist around whom the relevant elements of a scenario could coalesce. In *Reconfiguration*, written as a faux academic paper that documents a case study apparently found in the British Library archives of Ellis’s papers, I switch the approach used in *A Wo/Man* on its head. Here, I create an *antagonist*, known only as R., to facilitate my interrogation of Ellis’s idea of ‘Eonism’ – that ‘cross-gender behaviour sprang from an identification with, an imitation of an object of desire’, detailed further in my story⁶¹ – and to ask why Hirschfeld’s definition of the ‘transvestite’ (which led, during the 1940s, to that of the ‘transsexual’) became the dominant framework within which trans people understood their gender identities.

Ellis appears in the background of *A Wo/Man of No Importance*, most significantly introducing Parr to Krafft-Ebing’s study of gender variance in *Psychopathia Sexualis*.⁶² Here, he is the main character, in my only story to use a historical individual in this way. Using Ellis across both stories allows me to mark important shifts in sexology, not just in its uncoupling of gender and sexuality but also in its investigation of the female sphere and lesbian subculture that emerged in the United Kingdom after the First World War. It also allows me to speculate on why this subculture is noticeably absent from *Eonism* and bring female-to-male people into my fiction for the first time (beyond a couple of passing references in my previous stories). Like Parr, R. has explored the current sexological categories and identifies as an ‘invert’; unlike Parr, R. was assigned female at birth, and is able to openly utter a desire to be/live as a man (at least to Ellis) with a female partner because there had not been any legal clampdown on female-to-male cross-dressers, or

lesbians, before the late 1920s. Through Ellis's engagement with R, I can chart the rising prominence of female-to-male people during the inter-war period, leading to the first British reassignment surgeries in the 1930s: as with *A Wo/Man of No Importance*, all the historical material in *Reconfiguration* is true, apart from that specifically related to R.

Although *Reconfiguration* is not set within a literary circle, literature is once again important to the story. I made Ellis my protagonist partly because he wrote an introduction to Radclyffe Hall's novel *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) and provided a statement of support when Hall was charged with obscenity. The magistrate denounced *The Well of Loneliness* for its description of 'horrible practices' and 'two people living in sin', positioning it squarely as a novel about female homosexuality; writing nearly fifty years later, novelist and critic Jane Rule described it as '*the lesbian novel*'.⁶³ But Jay Prosser, writing in 1998, pointed out an obvious problem for this canonisation: 'its protagonist is unwaveringly male-identified', and the category of 'lesbian' never features.⁶⁴ *The Well of Loneliness* was slated for publication in the same year as another novel whose main character was later read as either lesbian or trans, or something in between – Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*. Woolf's text, however, was an exuberant fantasy, with Orlando changing sex at will, written with genuine wit in a spirit of modernist experimentation; Hall's was strictly realist in form, raising questions about the *kind* of reality it represented. Its protagonist identifies as an 'invert', but uses a male name, Stephen Gordon (given by her parents, in particular her father, who had wanted a boy), and presents in a masculine fashion throughout, allowing Prosser to read *The Well of Loneliness* as 'our first and most canonical transsexual novel'.⁶⁵

In an extensive reading in which he places the novel in its sexological context, Prosser noted that *The Well of Loneliness* was 'published on the very horizon of the discursive transition from inversion to transsexuality'.⁶⁶ When reading it through a trans-historical lens, I asked myself if Hall did not have terminology such as 'lesbian' or 'transvestite' to hand, did not think it would be understood by readers, or worried that it would be too well understood by those who censored Ellis's work. I cannot know, but Hall's awareness of contemporary sexology comes into the narrative: after Stephen asks him if she '*could* be a man, supposing I thought very hard – or prayed', Stephen's father goes to his study and consults a translated book by German gay rights pioneer Karl Heinrich Ulrichs.⁶⁷ (It's

worth noting that this access to such an esoteric private library is just one signifier of an incredibly upper-class British narrative: Stephen has a governess and falls in love with her housemaid, and one of the main ways in which she realises that she cannot fit into feminine norms is that she rides a horse ‘like a man’.⁶⁸)

Stephen’s own discomfort with her own body, as well as social expectations about how she should dress and behave, and who she should love, find expression in her actions more than in her self-description, as her hatred of women’s clothing and attraction to women are introduced in its first chapters. It is easy to understand why post-war lesbian-feminist movements felt able to claim *The Well of Loneliness*, given not just that Stephen forms relationships exclusively with women, but also Hall’s observations about how Stephen, read by her peers as a masculine woman, gets treated by men: the appeal to feminists of narratorial asides such as ‘men found [*Stephen*] too clever if she ventured to expand, and too dull if she suddenly subsided into shyness’ is obvious.⁶⁹

The thing that breaks Stephen out of his shyness – and could, Hall implies, draw people gendered as feminine out of socially-mandated subservience – is war. After Hall has taken Stephen into adulthood, the First World War breaks out, and she is desperate to defy gender conventions and enter the conflict, hinting at how the war not just opened employment opportunities for women at home, but also on the Western Front.⁷⁰ Eventually, Stephen joins the London Ambulance Column, finding meaning to her life – and love – in the hostilities despite them being ‘the most stupendous and heartbreaking folly of our times’.⁷¹ (Hall explored this further in her short story ‘Miss Ogilvy Finds Herself’, first published two years before *The Well of Loneliness*, in 1926.) In this, Hall posited the war as a liberating force, far more than so than the suffragettes or other early feminist movements, which do not come into the narrative. Her novel’s famous ending – ‘Acknowledge us, oh God, before the whole world. Give us also the right to our existence!’⁷² – could be taken as a rallying call for lesbians, trans people or anyone else living in a prejudiced society. However, it should only be taken as a demand for recognition of ‘inverts’ – the only sexological label used in the text.⁷³

Like the Wilde trial, *The Well of Loneliness* has been extensively discussed, so again, I would like to focus on the question of *why* to use it as historical background for a piece

of short fiction, along with why I have invented an individual rather than speculate about Hall's conversations with Ellis. Inventing an analogous character liberates the story from questions about whether Radclyffe Hall was 'really' 'trans' and allows me to present *The Well of Loneliness*' subtext through a proto-trans person's eyes, rather than simply relitigating Prosser's analysis. This reading of Hall is transformative for R., being their first encounter with a representation of someone who was born female but does not fit cultural gender norms – as Prosser wrote, the novel 'provided ... a narrative map for transitioning transsexuals'.⁷⁴ In *Reconfiguration*, R. tells Ellis that 'I saw more of myself' in Hall's novel 'than in any other story I've read'.⁷⁵ Its effect is to allow R. to talk more openly about a desire for sex reassignment surgery, leading Ellis to explore the possibilities, providing a direct illustration of how *The Well of Loneliness* (and, by implication, any future works by or about trans people) could contribute 'to the formalisation of transsexual subjectivity'.⁷⁶ In this, *The Well of Loneliness* helps R. to complete a journey towards post-operative anonymity and relative social acceptance that might also have been Goldsand's destination after reading those Victorian newspaper reports about cross-dressers: R's surgery 'at an unnamed hospital – most likely Charing Cross'⁷⁷ completes the process of urbanisation, legislation and medicalisation that, as Stryker argued in *Transgender History* (and I cited in my Introduction), gave rise to post-war trans and LGBTQI+ identities.⁷⁸

By the end of the story, it is clear that gender identity and sexuality *are* distinct phenomena, as Hirschfeld had argued years earlier, despite R.'s reluctance to let go of the 'invert' category. In hindsight, we know Ellis's idea of 'Eonism' did not replace the 'invert', placing a fictionalised Ellis in dialogue with an invented character allows me to hint towards why I think that was, merging creative writing with historiography in a more formalised way than in *A Wo/Man of No Importance*. More than any other piece in my series, *Reconfiguration* uses my background in academic writing, especially my undergraduate study of History: I opted against inventing a scholar who had collated and commented upon Ellis' archival material, however, as doing so would have obliged me to explain who this scholar was, and their connection to Ellis, in a way that would have detracted from the plot. Instead, the anonymous narrator recounts the story as simply as possible but cannot avoid occasional value-judgements – for example, the narrator points out that the published version of *Eonism* included only one comparable case history to

R's, involving a married, heterosexual woman who 'experienced erotic dreams from the onset of sexual life, where she was a young man, making love to a woman'.⁷⁹

This raises questions about my use of Ellis as my protagonist, and particularly my decision to create a history of his involvement with female-to-male people that, besides his endorsement of *The Well of Loneliness*, is not reflected in any of his published works. I had no ethical qualms about my use of Ellis *per se*: plenty of works use real-life individuals, and my portrayal is, I feel, respectful, particularly in showing his methodology of listening to people and drawing conclusions based on their testimony, avoiding some psychoanalysts' projection of 'complexes and perverse fantasies' onto patients that he criticised in *Eonism*.⁸⁰ (I also allowed Ellis some self-awareness about the flaws on his methods, noting that his habit of finding interviewees via his professional networks meant he would often meet people with an unrepresentative prior knowledge of sexological concepts.⁸¹) It is obvious that *Reconfiguration* is not strictly factual, but is it *truthful* in the way that historical fiction needs to be to illuminate the period it depicts?

The narrative shifts from Ellis wanting a case study to use in *Eonism*, to his interventions to help R. acquire surgery, after he realises that R. will not fit his Eonist paradigm of imitating an object of desire – R. has made it clear that s/he is attracted to women, but does not want to be a woman, and will become a heterosexual man after transition. As with the preceding stories, this is about the semi-voluntary invisibility and erasure of historical trans people; here, R. *wants* to live in 'stealth', even if s/he has not been 'programmed to disappear' like later transsexual people who were told to 'pass' by post-war Gender Identity Clinics.⁸² R's decision to pursue surgery confirms the superiority of Hirschfeld's 'transvestite' concept and means that Ellis must catch up. Reading *Eonism*, I found it rather unconvincing, sensing that Ellis knew as he was writing it that his theories no longer held up; using the emergence of female-to-male people as the underlying reason for that allowed me to comment on how they had previously been ignored by the law and by sexologists who responded to it. My use of Ellis also allowed me to set up a connection between sexology and surgery that was more prominent in Germany as Hirschfeld's Institute of Sexual Science, which pioneered sex reassignment techniques during the 1920s, but also existed in the UK, through two characters who feature in *Reconfiguration* – sexologist Norman Haire, to whom Ellis writes throughout the story, and surgeon

Lennox Broster, whose operations on Mark (*née* Mary) Weston at Charing Cross Hospital in 1936 form another piece of *Reconfiguration*'s historical background.⁸³

In the years leading up to the Second World War, several transsexual men had made headlines in the British press. Weston's case was publicised, alongside those of Mark Woods, Mack Hutchison, Gene Joynt and Donald Purcell, as well as several in Eastern Europe, including Zdeněk Koubek (Czechoslovakia) and Witold Smętek (Poland), who, like Weston, had been successful female athletes before transition.⁸⁴ At this time, they were still treated by the media as isolated individuals – Clare Tebbutt's PhD thesis asserts that 'The tone of the coverage was largely positive ... creating an impression of the ordinariness of sex change as a feature of modern life'.⁸⁵ Havelock Ellis did not survive to see it, having died aged 80 in 1939 (he lived four years longer than Magnus Hirschfeld, who died in exile in Nice after the Nazis ransacked his Institute of Sexual Science), but surgical advances made by Harold Gillies in response to wartime genital injuries were applied to transsexual women after peace was restored, and by the 1950s, medical professionals worked on the premise that gender identity was separate from sexuality, with Ellis's models of inversion and Eonism long discarded. Over the following decades, trans people – and particularly transsexual people – would move from curiosities and case studies to recognisable categories, attracting attention not so much from the courts or the sexologists as from the mass media.

CHAPTER TWO: Autobiography, activism and cultural representation

The first transsexual memoir – arguably – was *Man into Woman: The First Sex Change* (1933), an account of the life of Lili Elbe, who died after an operation in 1931. More recently and in a heavily fictionalised form, Elbe’s life also became the subject of David Ebershoff’s novel *The Danish Girl* and the 2015 film based on it. The text discussed Elbe’s surgeries with Dr Kurt Warnekros under Hirschfeld’s supervision, but it was not a ‘memoir’ as such: several names were changed, including Elbe’s assigned one, and it was posthumously edited by ‘Niels Hoyer’ – a pseudonym for German writer Ernst Harthen. (The English translation, issued in 1933, was introduced by Norman Haire.) Consequently, it sat somewhere between memoir and fiction in a way that may have produced a more interesting text, had it been a conscious experiment in blurring those boundaries rather than a fudge made because the surviving people involved with Elbe’s story feared reprisals in a world veering ever further into fascism.

Yet over the following fifty years, memoir became the dominant form of transsexual writing. By the late 1980s, it was an identifiable genre, with its own conventions and clichés. The most widely read in the UK was *Conundrum* (1974) by Jan Morris, which owed its prominence to her being a well-known travel writer, having covered John Hunt’s Everest expedition in 1953; this made her one of the few authors of such a memoir to be famous for something besides being transsexual. Her transition had been of intense interest to the British press, and something that, it seems, Morris documented reluctantly: this was the only book she ever published on any trans issue, referring to her gender reassignment as “the conundrum thing” and ‘preferring to let that account speak for itself’ rather than discussing her story, or its context, further.⁸⁶ It is understandable that Morris resented such focus on her personal life over her professional output, but her reputation, as well as her deft use of travel imagery and a literary conversion structure, meant *Conundrum* achieved a level of respect from critics that her transsexual contemporaries did not; its structure and style reflected her background, presenting her transition as a journey from being ‘three or perhaps four years old when I realized that I had been born into the wrong body, and should really be a girl’⁸⁷ towards her surgery in Morocco (then easier to acquire there than the UK), when she reached her destination of womanhood.

It was *Conundrum*, rather than the memoirs of British transsexual models April Ashley or Tula (Caroline Cossey) – both outed by the press – that Sandy Stone focused on in *The Empire Strikes Back: A Post-Transsexual Manifesto*. Here, Stone named *I Changed My Sex!*, written by ‘striptease artist’ Hedy Jo Star in the 1950s, as the ‘first fully autobiographical’ transsexual memoir, noting that it rode the wave of publicity after Christine Jorgensen’s surgery (discussed below).⁸⁸ Stone then discussed how Elbe, Star and Morris ‘reinforce[d] a binary, oppositional mode of gender identification’ in their memoirs, constructing ‘a specific narrative moment when their personal sexual identification changes from male to female’, always with their ‘sex change surgery’.⁸⁹ This formed the cornerstone of her argument that such memoirs tended to flinch from the most interesting – and, in a hostile society, the most daunting – intellectual challenge, of documenting the experience of living in a space *between* the gender binary, and her call for ‘post-transsexual’ writing to combine its exploration of this territory with a serious reconsideration of which literary techniques and genres might best convey it.

Excerpts from Elbe’s, Morris’s and Jorgensen’s books – the latter not published until 1967 – appeared in *Sexual Metamorphosis: An Anthology of Transsexual Memoirs* (2005), in which editor Jonathan Ames identified a typical three-act structure beginning with ‘gender-dysphoric childhood’, then a ‘move to the big city’ and ‘the transformation’, ending in ‘a place of self-acceptance and peace’.⁹⁰ As mentioned in my Introduction, Stone’s manifesto expressed scepticism about how these memoirs presented territory between ‘male’ and ‘female’, passing too smoothly through it, creating suspicion about the reliability of transsexual memoir, as well as a sense that to use it was to indulge prurience about trans (especially male-to-female) bodies, fuelled by media sensationalism. This led trans authors to move away from the genre, and towards more theoretical and/or activist modes of writing.

Whilst all three of my stories covered in this chapter engage with the memoir form, recognising that it retains an importance place in the history of trans writing, as well as its present, it is not my primary aim to interrogate its tropes here – I did that in my Guardian series (2010-12) and *Trans: A Memoir* (2015), and other pieces of journalism.⁹¹ None of these stories follow Ames’ three-act structure: one reason for using short fiction was to avoid the trap of reiterating it or rewriting *Trans: A Memoir* as a novel. Instead,

they focus on specific social or political issues, and how openly trans authors recorded them, beginning with media intrusion into the lives of some of the UK's first transsexual people during the 1950s (recounted in Ashley and Cossey's books, besides others) before moving onto the exclusion of transsexual and gender non-conforming people from the wave of gay and lesbian activism after the Stonewall riots of 1969. I conclude with a story set in the mid-1990s, after Stone's essay had launched a new wave of transgender theory, which engages with the numerous films made about – but rarely with, and never starring – trans people during that decade. My first story, *Dancing with the Devil*, is a chapter from an imaginary memoir, engaging with the registers of mid-20th century transsexual autobiography in a creative way, without less scepticism than in *Trans: A Memoir*. My second, *Never Going Underground*, is written as a first-person narrative: this makes it the most conventional story in my collection, but by placing it between two others that more explicitly incorporate the memoir, I question the formal separation between that genre and literature. My third, *'The Twist'* is very metatextual, written as a film script *about* a feature film that collapsed because the memoir on which it was based was known to be unreliable.

This chapter also charts the growth of 'transsexual' into a relatively stable category, defined by sexologists as someone who moved from one gender to another through hormone treatment and surgery, in a process extensively covered in contemporary memoirs, which meant I was no so reliant on digital archives, nor so compelled to invent 'secret' documents to convey stories that could not be told. Also, I no longer needed to worry about imposing identities onto people who preceded them, nor about separating trans individuals from gay or lesbian ones. (Indeed, that process took place in the bitter struggles of the 1970s and 1980s and is still not settled.) As hundreds, if not thousands of people had been through the gender reassignment process by the end of the 1980s (when *Never Going Underground* is set), I no longer felt it necessary to base characters as firmly on real-life people as in the stories covered earlier in this essay; the diversity of 'the trans community' by the late 20th century is reflected in *'The Twist'*, where spaces set up especially for gender-variant people are explored for the first time. Consequently, it is only the first story here that features characters who bear a striking resemblance to any historical individuals: this chapter opens with them.

Dancing with the Devil

Laura Miller was born in Coventry in 1927. This extract from Dancing with the Devil picks up her story on her return to the UK after three years in New York, where she worked as a cabaret performer, dancer, and waitress at the infamous Club 82, operated by the mafia when gay bars and female impersonation were illegal. She moved to London in 1955, and eventually began a new career as a model. After the events outlined below, she withdrew from public life; little has been heard from her since she published this memoir in 1970.

From Chapter 8

Click, click, click. I'd become used to the cameras by now, and in a way, I liked the fact that none of the photographers took the slightest interest in anything about me beyond how I looked. I'd had enough of telling people who I was, what I thought and how I felt, only for them to turn around and insist that I was wrong. Now – once I'd gone through the daily rigmarole of making myself look presentable – my exchanges were simple. I made the face they wanted; they pressed a button. Occasionally, I would have to remind myself not to blink on the flash, but that was as hard as it got. *Click, click, click.*

I knew it *could* become more complicated at any moment. Someone just had to go to the press. That someone could be my brother, I often thought. By now, though, I figured that if he hadn't done it, he probably wouldn't. If he was waiting for my stock to rise further, he was in for a disappointment – the public might not have known my secret, but the industry did. I'd slept with enough of Britain's actors for word to get around, and I couldn't help wondering if that was the reason why other people moved rapidly from non-speaking extra parts to speaking ones to supporting roles when I was never offered a word on film. The Wolfenden Report hadn't landed yet, and if those actors were wondering about whether sleeping with me made them a "pansy", then they were probably worried that it could land them in gaol. Maybe not many of them boasted about a night in my bed, then, but how could I know? Something was holding me back, and it seemed more likely that than anything else.

I noticed more than one of my conquistadors bravely avoiding my glance at the *Dance with the Devil* wrap party. One man, though, caught my eye. At first, he looked just like any other suit at these things. His only distinguishing feature was that he was shorter than all the men and most of the women (not that there were many) and a good six inches fewer than me. It looked like he'd come alone, and he was one of the few people who didn't seem unable or unwilling to approach me. As soon as he said "Hello, I'm Frank," I knew something was up. He sounded like his voice never broke, and for a split second, I envied him more than I'd ever envied anyone, before I thought what a nightmare that must have been during his schooldays. Anyhow, he wasn't unattractive, smooth skin and slick hair, like a softer Cary Grant, so I held my tongue. Then I wondered: *Did he know about me? Is he like me?*

We got talking, and he told me he was setting up a London office for his father's tea business because his family were thinking of leaving India after independence, the partition, and what he described as "Nehru's creeping Bolshevism". He had a calm, gentle manner that put me at ease, and was quite upfront when I asked what brought him to the party. His family were "philanthropists", he said, passionate about culture, often putting money into "high-brow" films like this one. Then, he became more interested in me. How did I get into the film industry, or modelling? Given how charming and beautifully-spoken I apparently was, why wasn't I better known? Did I want to be? What were my hopes, ambitions, and dreams?

We chatted all evening, helped by the copious free booze – all that champagne, I joked, made me feel like an aristocrat. Frank laughed, and if what he'd already told me didn't make it clear why my remark made him a bit nervous, what I saw next did. When the party ended, I offered to take him to my bedsit in Soho, not mentioning my many depressing nights spent there with fumbling johns. Politely, he suggested his place might be a bit more comfortable, and I wasn't going to argue. It's incredible, really, how near Soho is to Mayfair, and yet ...

After a short taxi ride (which he covered, aware that being an occasional model and even more occasional film extra wasn't even as glamorous as it looked) we reached the penthouse flat that was the Bolton-Taylor Company's main London residence. First, he

showed me the roof terrace, pointing out Marble Arch and then Hyde Park and Kensington Palace, saying we couldn't see Buckingham Palace from here but talking about 'Queen Liz' with such affection that I wondered if they were friends. Then he apologised for the mess inside the apartment, as if mine wasn't far worse. He had contracts and letters, Liberal pamphlets and film magazines, suits in the wardrobe and underwear on the floor, mainly gents' but a few ladies', which made me wonder if I was becoming his mistress.

After a long chat and plenty more to drink, he put his hand up my dress and paused.

"I thought you knew," I said.

"I thought you knew," he replied with a strange half-smile.

"Knew what?"

He stood, unbuttoned his shirt and took off his belt.

"I don't know what the word is, but I'm seeing a doctor on Harley Street ..." He let his trousers drop. *"If only we could swap bodies, eh?"*

I put my arm around his shoulders, drew his lips to mine and kissed him. I think we both knew that there were many more revelations to come. But they could wait.

*

After *Dance with the Devil*, a director offered me a small speaking role. I was only going to be in one scene, and the film didn't look amazing – a screwball comedy called *All Over the Shop*, about a maverick shopkeeper or something – but it was a big step up from walking on, looking sultry and walking off again. *Maybe you should get an agent*, Frank joked at a celebratory meal (which, once again, was his treat). Then there was a pregnant pause.

"You arranged this?" He looked at me, knowingly. *"Oh, darling, you didn't have to do that."*

“I didn’t go out of my way – just put in a word for you over dinner. The casting agent is friends with my brother.”

“I thought your family only got involved with ‘high-brow’ films,” I replied.

“You’ll make it classier,” he insisted, and raised his glass.

The rest of the night was a bit of a blur. But as I woke up in Mayfair the next morning, I thought about how I’d finally landed on my feet. No more waiting on boorish Americans who wanted me on the side but blew their tops if I ever dared suggest being anything beyond their mistress. No more dancing for punters who cheered and leered when I was on stage but treated me like dirt when I was off. No more competing with the girls to be these mobsters’ favourites when we should have been looking after each other; and, best of all, no more protection money for the New York mafia, and no more feeling that I’d be cast out into the street if I didn’t give in to their every whim. Now, I had Frank. I know every woman says her man is *different*, but he really was (and not just in the obvious ways, either).

Clearly, even this fleeting moment of happiness, attached to a handful of lines in a trivial film, meant I was getting too far out of my box. I was back in Soho, trying to make my hovel look like a home, or at least inhabitable, when I got a phone call.

“Laura, it’s me.” Frank sounded flustered – not his usual self. “They’re onto us.”

“Wait, hold on,” I replied. “Who’s ‘they’?”

“The *Daily Express*.”

“Oh, Christ. Who told *them*?”

“I don’t know.”

“How did you hear about it?”

“My brother just called me. He used to be a journalist.”

“He told them?”

“No!” said Frank. “He mentioned you to a friend, who’d heard about it, and tipped him off.”

“Does this friend know who the reporter is?”

“No, he tried to find out, but no-one would tell him.”

“Jesus wept ... Any idea what they’re planning?”

“No,” he replied. “I think they’ve just heard a rumour for now. Have you noticed anyone or anything strange around you lately?” I hesitated. “Apart from me,” he laughed.

His joke snapped me out of a dark train of thought. If we were both going to be exposed, then I could lose all my film work, probably my modelling as well, and I didn’t fancy the idea of spending my life in the papers or on the television explaining myself like Christine Jorgensen – if anyone would even listen. At best, it would be back to Club 82 and the mob; at worst, the game. Somewhere between the two laid the end of Blackpool pier. None of them appealed. As for Frank – he had the emotional support of his family, though they weren’t exactly thrilled about the whole thing, but he worried they’d take his name off the business, which could mean losing his income entirely. However this might pan out, it didn’t look good.

My next thought was to wonder who might have sold us out, and how I might wring his neck. Perhaps it was one of the furtive blokes at the wrap party, or maybe the *Express* had sent some private dick along to that because they *already* knew and wanted to find out more; seeing that I was trying to form a relationship for them to destroy was an added bonus. (And people said the way *I* lived was disgusting.)

“If you can’t beat them, join them,” said Frank over an expensive consolatory dinner.

“How can we *join* them?” I asked.

“They’ve been snooping on you, right? Following you around, trying to find people who know you, going through your bins?”

I didn’t *know* if anyone had done this, but I’d put nothing past these people, so I just nodded.

“Two can play *that* game,” said Frank. “I’m going to hire someone. A private investigator that our firm have used. Mate’s rates. He knows about me and he’s fine with it, so he won’t have any problems with you.” He paused, smiling as I raised an apprehensive eyebrow. “Mad as it sounds, some of these detectives are actually decent chaps.”

“What good will it do?”

“Well – we find out who this reporter is and what he’s got. Then we can work out how to stop him. First, we’ll try to reason with him. Unlikely – so if that doesn’t work, and he’s not scared off by the fact that unlike most of the people they go for, we can actually answer back, then we threaten to take him to court.”

“Won’t they have better lawyers?”

“Maybe, but do they really need this story that much? It’s not like we’re Prince Rainier and Grace Kelly or anything.”

“No, I suppose not.” I thought for a moment. “What if he won’t budge? Would we still be able to sell them my story as an exclusive? That’d give me a bit of control, at least.”

“And risk all your work?”

“It might be all right,” I replied. “And it sounds like it’s going to happen anyway.”

“I think we can stop it,” Frank insisted. “It’s worth a pop.”

Frank’s mate was called Derek – an affable bloke who played rugby, went to the opera, and listened to the BBC Third Programme. He was worlds apart from the boys I grew up with in Coventry, or the girls I danced with in New York. I ended up spending a *lot* of time with him, as he constantly had to be at my side to look out for anyone shifty enough to be a reporter. It seemed pointless: they had their story, and it was just a matter of time before they confirmed it. I couldn’t help thinking that Frank was more worried about his reputation than mine, and I thought that the best outcome now might be a laughably absurd tabloid exposé of my “red-hot affair” with a private detective (who, really, was one of the most sexless people I’d ever met).

So, there I was, going everywhere with this man who was trying not to be seen with me, in a hunt for another man who was trying not to be seen looking for me. Meanwhile, Frank and I kept going out in town, a masked ball here, a private member’s club there, avoiding the film world (apart from the shoots for *All Over the Shop* – which, it was becoming apparent, was not going to be on the level of *Kind Hearts and Coronets*, setting its Icarus-like ambitions at ripping off Norman Wisdom’s *Trouble in Store*) because it was the obvious place to find us. After a long night that began in a theatre (to see if all the fuss about *The Mousetrap* was warranted) and ended in a taxi from a dance hall in Chelsea, which felt like a beautiful riposte to the people trying to tear us apart, we got

back to Frank's flat to find a sealed envelope, with no name, in his letterbox. He opened the letter right away.

'I'VE SEEN YOUR MAN IN THE SHADOWS, TRYING TO KILL OUR STORY – YOU SHOULD TELL HIM TO GET A LESS JAZZY CAR. FIFTY POUNDS WILL KEEP YOUR NAME OUT OF THE PAPERS. MEET ME IN SOHO ON TUESDAY AT 10 P.M. – LOCATION T.B.C.'

"Well, at least we know why Derek was so cheap," I sighed, as I watched Frank's hands trembling. "Should we go to the police?"

"Who knows what they'll do?" he replied. "They might even be in on it. Even if they're not – do you think they're going to side with the likes of us?"

"I don't expect much, but when it's this clear-cut ..."

"They wouldn't be so clear-cut if they didn't think they'd get away with it," said Frank.

"You're not going to pay them?"

"I'll show it to my lawyer and see what they suggest. Oh my God, Laura, I'm so sorry you're getting caught up in all this."

"They'd have gone after me anyway," I replied. "And I would've been alone."

He squeezed my hand and we took the lift to his flat, but neither of us slept a wink. At dawn, when we'd given up on getting any sleep, Frank went back downstairs. Whoever it was who was blackmailing us had left another card. It suggested an address in Soho, a few doors from my bedsit – coincidence or not, I never knew.

Frank's lawyers said there was not much they could do with just these typewritten cards for evidence, beyond going to the police. The cops probably *would* take it seriously, they thought, and they may well turn up at the specified time and place and arrest the blackmailer – but that still left us at the risk of being investigated under the Sexual Offences Act, and the newspapers running a piece about us out of spite. Frank looked through his accounts: he could just about afford the ransom without having to ask his father for support, but it would make things tough until the London branch was up and running. No more ballrooms, and no more fine dining.

I insisted that Frank did not go to meet whoever it was, and for the first time since I fled New York, not telling a soul where I was going, I wished I was still in touch with some of the heavies. Derek sent a couple of his more intimidating friends – neither he nor Frank ever told me exactly who they were, or who they met, but they got a result: an agreement was reached whereby our extortionist's representative could either drop his demand, or spend his £50 on a taxi home from outer London and a new set of teeth. Wisely, he chose the former, but we still didn't know if the bomb would drop. Now more than ever, said Frank, it might be a good idea to get out of the city, at least until the heat was off – but where could we go?

*

Nowhere was the grimly inevitable answer. It wasn't out of the question for Frank to return to India, but he didn't fancy explaining to his family that *I* was the reason when they'd struggled so hard to accept his own sex change. Besides, we had no idea what I would do there. (Frank wore a huge grin when he suggested I be his secretary, but I wasn't entirely sure it was a joke.) It *was* out of the question for me to return to New York, even if all my debts were cleared, and my only other option – the Paris of Toni April, Coccinelle and *Le Carousel* – didn't work for Frank, whose only realistic choices were Calcutta or London, or at least somewhere close to London. Neither of us fancied the commute from the suburbs, let alone the stifling life among the gossipers and curtain-twitchers, so we had to stay put.

The easiest and safest way to support myself, and the only one that tabloid exposure would not destroy, would have been to go back to the clubs. But after the Coronation and the 'clean-up' that came with it, there wasn't a scene in London like the ones in Paris or New York – drag acts were fine for our brave boys in the colonies during the war, but not the upstanding new society presided over by Queen Liz. (It turned out that Frank *didn't* know her; my tactic of getting him to ask for favours had its limits.) The papers were full of articles about how to root out 'Evil Men', and the trial of Lord Montagu, Pitt-Rivers and Wildeblood was fresh in the memory. If the police saw a man in a frock in a car around Soho, they'd pull him over, tell him to get out and then arrest him for soliciting, and ask for money to drop the charges. My friend Mary got arrested in Covent Garden

just for wearing a blouse with stockings and heels. She told the rozzers that she was on hormones from the Marylebone Clinic, showing them an article about Christine Jorgensen that she kept in her bag in case she had to explain herself in such an emergency, and she got away with nothing worse than a night in the cells and a nasty little feature in the *News of the World*. I was scared to go to the bars, pubs and clubs, especially with Frank – he had legally changed his birth certificate, but I hadn't, so officially we were a 'male' couple – and they didn't want to admit 'obvious queens'. There was nothing more obvious than performing, so there was no circuit.

It took us a fortnight to work all that out, during which time the exposé *still* hadn't hit – nobody had even contacted us about it. Neither of us were sleeping: Frank focused on the boring but necessary parts of the business, putting out adverts for staff, raising invoices, which didn't form much of a distraction, but that he probably wouldn't mess up if his mind were elsewhere. I got on with my modelling – if I looked like I was drifting, the photographers would click their fingers before they clicked their buttons. Learning my handful of lines for *All Over the Shop* was a little harder, and Frank spent several evenings drumming them into me, trying to hide his frustration at my inability to focus.

"Perhaps they've decided not to do it," I said, on our first night out since getting that call. "I'm not banking on it," Frank replied. "You might want to be famous, but I don't." "I want to be an actor. If that means getting famous, so be it, but it's not my dream in itself. And there's a difference between being famous and being *infamous*, darling." "Like being 'flammable' and 'inflammable'?"

"Not really." I took a sip of wine. "Sometimes, you're too damned dry for your own good. Too many Hollywood movies."

"Frankly, my dear," he replied, "it would be too damned obvious to crack that joke. And besides – as you well know – I *do* give a damn. We need to find out exactly what's going on, or we'll have this hanging over us for ever. And it'll only loom larger the more successful you become."

"You're not going to hire another detective, are you?"

“No,” he insisted. “We go to them. Try to talk to them face-to-face. Maybe, once they see the lives they’ll ruin, they’ll think twice about doing it. To us, or anyone like us.”

I wasn’t convinced. Appealing to the better nature of tabloid reporters seemed no better than getting the Keystone Cops on the case, and the more people we met, the more likely we were to be ‘read’ and sold. Frank, optimistic, said this was equally true of my modelling and acting career, adding that withdrawing from public life would be to let the bastards win. Perhaps we could find our man and discuss it like grown-ups, he insisted. In any case, I didn’t have a better idea. Frank, at least, knew how to appeal to *me*: once I realised his plan would mostly involve chatting to interesting people over cocktails in bars in Fitzrovia, I reluctantly got on board. Our line was that he worked for a theatre company (although not as actor or director) and that I was a book-keeper “who had always wanted to write”, which was true. We insisted we “didn’t like talking about our work” and were more interested in whomever we met, which mostly worked.

Getting journalists to talk about themselves was never a problem; listening to them do so for hours on end seemed like the only way to gain their trust. I wasn’t sure if they were too self-absorbed to notice that we were transsexual, too polite to mention it, or if it just never occurred to them, but that was a surprising problem – how could we have a sensitive discussion that would lead to our man if they were oblivious to the core issue? Several times, we disclosed to people, after hours of talking. Some of them were sympathetic, saying that our lives “must be hard enough as it is” without this sort of harassment from an industry created to speak truth to power. Some of them weren’t, one even telling me that I’d had myself “mutilated” to screw money from the British public. A couple just got up and walked away, and they frightened me most. Was this such a good plan? Had Frank just ensured that his inheritance would be squandered in an unwinnable quest to silence or sue anyone who might talk?

Just at the point when I thought we were in too deep, we found our man: a freelance journalist called Harry Thurlow, commissioned by the *Express*. Initially, Thurlow had hoped to talk to us, we were told, but someone tipped him off that we had been tipped off and then, fearing the loss of his story, he had resorted to snooping and then blackmail.

Through our intermediary – whom I shan't name, but who was one of the kindest people we met – we set up a meeting.

"Maybe we should just agree to sell it," I suggested the day before.

"You think *that* should be our opening gambit?" Frank almost shouted. "Jesus Christ, Laura – sometimes I think you *want* this to happen."

"Perhaps I do," I replied, holding back my tears. "I'm so sick of living in the shadows, being grateful when people treat me like dirt ... Perhaps it will be better, probably it'll be worse, but at least it won't be the same."

"Our first card is a cease and desist order. If that works on him, it'll work on anyone else."

"And if it doesn't, I'm bankrupt and you're broken."

"It's going to come out sooner or later," were Thurlow's first words to us, in a dimly-lit corner of a Soho jazz club. "You can spend a fortune on lawyers, pay me off and then realise you've wasted your money, or play the game and take the cash. What's it going to be?"

"If we play your game, we can't play any others," said Frank. "That's the point."

I didn't want to betray Frank by saying it probably *was* the only game in town, so I kept silent. His steel amazed me: I may have become used to being trampled, but he hadn't, and wouldn't. So, I listened, keeping a poker face as I could only be helpful by looking unflappable, as he told Thurlow how much he was prepared to spend on legal fees, and the quality of the lawyers at his disposal. Do that, Thurlow told him, and the peaceful settlement is off the table. We asked how much the *Express* could offer. £250 was his answer. When he went away, ostensibly to go to the bar but obviously to let us confer, I suggested that we accept a story about me that didn't include Frank.

"I would have done that in the first place," snarled Thurlow, blowing cigar smoke into my face, "if you hadn't started spying on me. I didn't even know there were two of you." Frank looked crestfallen, but he continued. "You know, my editor is putting a lot of pressure on me. *Get their trust*, he said. *Then, once you have it, write it up as a couple of perverts trying to screw money out of the upstanding British public.* Box-office gold, right?" He took another drag. "We don't *have* to do that."

“No, you don’t,” I replied.

“But it’s a better story if it’s about two of you. Half the people, half the dough. And obviously, I couldn’t promise that it wouldn’t come out another way.”

“Another blackmail, eh?” said Frank. “Why are you so bent on destroying our lives? Is it really in the public interest?”

“If the public are interested, then it’s in the public interest. And believe me, they’re interested.”

Thurlow stubbed out his cigar.

“I’ve made my final offer. It’s up to you.”

All we could do was beg for some time to think. Thurlow gave us two weeks.

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While Frank went back to his lawyers, I began thinking about how I might make a living if I couldn’t get any more acting or modelling work. I did my bit in *All Over the Shop* – the shoot was the day after our meeting with Thurlow – and resolved to keep working in the film world. Maybe those bastards *would* stop me, I thought, but I wasn’t going to *let* them stop me. I asked around on set, fired off a few letters and photos, and got Frank to talk to his contacts.

I carried on modelling, finding it harder than ever to keep up a smile for the cameras. Suddenly, the flashes felt oppressive, blinding me as their operators encroached ever further to get the perfect shot and trapped me in their glare. Nonetheless, I took on more – catalogues, mostly. It turned out there were lots of places I could work and keep a relatively low profile. Once again, Frank and I had stopped going out in town, or even spending many of our evenings together. When we did, they just became circular conversations about our conundrum.

Four days before Thurlow’s deadline, we got a call. Another paper had got hold of the story, he told us, although he didn’t mention which one – probably, said Frank, to stop us

finding the journalist and starting a bidding war. I wondered if there *was* another paper at all, or if it was the *Express* trying to put pressure on us, but it forced us to finally reach an agreement. I would sell my story on the condition that they keep Frank out of it. It didn't matter that we'd only get half the money, and even if Thurlow didn't hold to that lowly promise, it would cost Frank far less to support me, at least temporarily, than it would to take them to court, or deal with the potential loss of *his* earnings.

We told Thurlow that we were prepared to negotiate. Frank brought a lawyer, who insisted on drafting a contract. There was to be one article, and only one, which would just be about me, with no mention of Frank, nor of any love interest who might be identified as Frank. Otherwise, they were only to include what I told them – nothing from anyone I had worked with (although I didn't know what they knew about my time in New York), and nothing from any family members. Thurlow accepted, although he was adamant that £100 would be his final offer for such a “neutered” story. We had no more than the verbal promise of a slightly higher fee, so we grudgingly signed, and I agreed to meet Thurlow the following week.

We met at the *Express* offices, and I gave my life away over a tepid cup of coffee. I told him all about growing up in Coventry, how our house got bombed by the Luftwaffe, less than thirty years after my father narrowly escaped death at the Somme. I told him about how Daddy had disowned me long before I went for surgery in Casablanca with the money I managed to save from the New York mafia; in fact, things with him had never been right since I stopped going to Church when I was 15, and he had gone to Kenya to do the Lord's work. I think he wanted more gossip: I wasn't going to name any of the actors I'd slept with, nor the performers or patrons at Club 82, and nor was I going to give him any leads. To his disappointment, I could not tell him much about Dr Burou and “the operation”, as I'd been asleep at the time. After a brief, tetchy exchange, Thurlow practically threw an envelope at me and told me to go home.

Three days later, the article appeared in the *Sunday Express*. Frank told me to stay in bed – he had asked for the paper to be delivered, along with *The Observer*, and he finished making me breakfast before he went to check the letterbox. It wasn't nearly as bad as we'd expected. My image, modelling an angora sweater for a clothing catalogue,

appeared on the front of one of the supplements, under the heading: ‘LAURA MILLER – MY EXTRAORDINARY STORY’. Mostly, Thurlow had kept his word. No quotes from estranged family members or former colleagues; no saucy exposés about actors or private investigators; and not a word about Frank. Indeed, it was framed far more sympathetically than Thurlow’s cold, threatening demeanour had led me to expect, focusing on my attempts to live a quiet life after my flight from New York. They were even kind about my film work, letting me talk about my childhood passion for acting, and ask why my background should preclude me from working in the industry.

That evening, Frank put on his finest suit and told me to get into my favourite dress, as we were going to celebrate something less than the worst coming to pass. Sure enough, the taxi took us to The Ritz, where at last we could dine and drink, and perfect strangers came up to us to tell us how we danced like we didn’t have a care in the world. The next morning, I went back in front of the cameras, and now the photographers had to tell me *not* to smile. They didn’t ask why I looked so happy, and I didn’t want to tell them. Perhaps they hadn’t read the *Express*, and if that was the case, I wasn’t going to recommend it, but I told myself that people *knew*, but they just didn’t *care*. With that in mind, I wrote a few more letters in search of film work, and began to dream of Hollywood, or at least Pinewood.

We’d relaxed too soon. It had been naïve to think that we could keep any control over this, and within a matter of weeks, £100 and a night at the Ritz looked like scant rewards for the level of intrusion and humiliation that we faced. Reporters started turning up at my shoots, wanting to know more about how I’d stopped talking to my parents, how I got expelled from secondary school when I was 14 and how I’d been arrested for ‘impersonating a female’ when I was 18 – I guessed my brother had realised he’d never have a better chance to make a few quid out of me, and soon enough, he was doing a full-page interview with the *Picture Post*. All this fuss over an actress who (given that *All Over the Shop* was still in production) had never yet uttered a word on film!

The modelling work began to dry up. When it came, the photographers were noticeably colder, as if shooting me against their will, and less keen to be seen chatting to me. (One or two were far *keener* than before to talk to me, but only when nobody was watching;

they followed me around, certain I'd want to sleep with them, because after all, who else would ever touch me? The actors I'd been with went uncharacteristically quiet, although a couple got in touch threatening libel acts if I dared to name them.) My letters about acting work went unanswered, and after getting the phone slammed down a couple of times, I stopped making calls.

After the third exposé, I thought that was that. Frank tried to console me.

"People will forget about it," he insisted. "Nobody's going to put you on a list. And I'll look after you while it dies down – you're not going to starve. Take a few days out, don't answer the phone or open the post. Get some rest, eat some good food and take some long walks. By next week, this won't feel like such a big deal, I promise."

For two days, I followed Frank's kind, loving advice. While he plugged on with the London side of the Bolton-Taylor family business, I slept in, and then made him a nice, nutritious lunch every day before strolling along the Thames or around one of the parks, usually Hyde Park but sometimes St. James's if I wanted to be closer to the royal family. (I thought they might have something to teach me about press intrusion, but truth be told, nobody on the street recognised me at all, even when I took off my sunglasses.) When I got home, I'd think about nothing more than the dinner I was going to prepare, and Frank always made sure his working day ended just as I was bringing the first dish to the table. In its small, modest way, it was bliss. And then:

'SEX SWAP MODEL'S MAN USED TO BE A GIRL'

Nobody had even warned us about this – published in the *Mail*, rather than the *Express* (who kept their word about only doing one article, for all the good that did us.) Frank came back from a trip to the newsagent, where he'd gone to pick up cigarettes, ashen-faced, and when I asked the matter, he practically threw the newspaper into my face.

"If you wanted more money, why didn't you just ask?"

“You don’t think I had anything to do with this?” I replied, once I’d registered the pictures of us both, and the headline had sunk in. He had his head in his hands, sobbing – he shook it to say he believed me, and kept saying he was sorry, but he wouldn’t let me put my arm around his shoulders, and just standing by him had no effect at all. Realising that if I didn’t stop frying the eggs then I would burn down half of Mayfair, I went back into the kitchen, and stared at our breakfast, congealing in the pan as Frank yelled about how he’d never asked for this, how he didn’t want people to know about his past, and how he couldn’t face his clients in London or Calcutta now that this was out. I tried to console him as he had me, by suggesting that it would blow over and that later, *he* would be the only person who remembered it. This just made him worse, wailing and pounding his thigh with his fist. I sat next to him; he put his head on my shoulder and wept. I don’t recall how long we spent like this, but it felt like hours.

I called up Thurlow to give him a piece of my mind. I didn’t know what it would achieve, but I hoped it might at least make me feel better. No chance. He said – truthfully, I supposed – that he and the *Express* had kept their side of the bargain: one story, about me, based on my words. Not their fault if other publications picked it up, he said; certainly, there was nothing they could do to stop them. He didn’t have any plans to write anything else about me, he said, playing the honourable gentleman, and if it was any consolation (which it wasn’t), it looked to him like the story had run its course, unless I landed any significant acting roles in future. (I didn’t, and they cut my scenes out of *All Over the Shop*).

Frank decided that London wasn’t for him after all. The business wasn’t really working – he had already been struggling to secure premises for a store, or find a partner he could trust, and now he worried that people wouldn’t want to deal with him at all. A week later, he told me that his family were going to sell the apartment in Mayfair, and that he would be moving back to India “to help consolidate their interests there”.

The last thing Frank did for me was to book me a plane, leaving Gatwick Airport on the same day as his. We drove through Surrey in silence, Frank crying more quietly this time, me staring out the window as we passed through those little towns full of the kind of people who bought the *Express*, who must have thought that between the twin threats of

the nuclear bomb and the transsexual actress, their small, small world was about to end. I had a bag of clothes and the address of a bedsit in Paris, near Le Carousel, where I hoped to relaunch my cabaret career, away from the New York mafia and the British press. Frank's flight to Calcutta left first. We hugged each other goodbye, I watched it take off, and the next I heard of him, ten years later, again through the papers, was in a tiny paragraph at the foot of the obituaries.

Dancing with the Devil, transsexual memoir and mass media

On 1 December 1952, US tabloid *New York Daily News* ran the front-page headline: 'Ex-GI Becomes Blonde Beauty: Operations Transform Bronx Youth'. It turned Christine Jorgensen, who had recently had sex reassignment surgery in Denmark, into a mass media phenomenon.⁹² According to *Newsweek*, America's three major wire services transmitted 50,000 words on Jorgensen over the next fortnight; reporters 'followed her every move in Copenhagen and hounded her parents at their home', treating her as 'the personification of glamour, akin to a Hollywood starlet'.⁹³ This sensationalism recalled the British media's treatment of Boulton and Park over eighty years earlier, but Jorgensen attracted an unprecedented amount of attention for a transsexual person: the tone was entirely different from the sober, scientific coverage of Mark Weston and other female-to-male people during the 1930s, being a mixture of amazement and amusement, celebration and condemnation.

That Jorgensen was 'young, pretty, gracious, and dignified' does not fully explain the frenzy, writes Susan Stryker; 'another part surely had to do with the mid-twentieth-century awe for scientific technology, which now could not only split atoms but also, apparently, turn a man into a woman'.⁹⁴ That Jorgensen was a former soldier tapped into anxieties about masculinity and sexuality, heightened by another world war in which many men had been killed, with women advancing further into western workplaces. By the 1950s, writes Stryker, those women were 'being steered back towards feminine domesticity' as 'millions of demobilized military men [*tried*] to fit themselves back into the civilian social order', meaning that 'questions of what made a man a man, or a woman a woman, were very much up for debate'.⁹⁵ These issues would be more hotly debated throughout the following decades, as more transsexual people became famous – often after being 'outed' by the media, with the most attention being paid to male-to-female people who, like Jorgensen, were 'conventionally beautiful'.⁹⁶

Seeking a domestic equivalent to Jorgensen, British newspapers found two, closely linked, in transsexual man Michael Dillon and transsexual woman Roberta Cowell. Dillon underwent a mastectomy in 1942, when he also managed to get his birth certificate and degree records changed, and had genital surgery under Harold Gillies in 1945.⁹⁷

According to biographer Liz Hodgkinson, Dillon ‘had a hand in carrying out a highly dubious kitchen-table surgery’ on Cowell in 1951, and was ‘romantically obsessed’ with her.⁹⁸ Like Jorgensen, Cowell had left a stereotypically masculine type of work, having been a racing driver and World War II fighter pilot, and had been married, with two daughters. Cowell sold her story to the *Picture Post* for £8,000 in 1954, and then published an autobiography that earned her an extra £1,500, making her the UK’s most famous transsexual woman.⁹⁹ Dillon, from an aristocratic background, did not need such money nor want such exposure: the *Sunday Express* outed him in 1958, and this trauma led him to become the first Western man to be ordained as a Tibetan monk, and he died in India just four years later.¹⁰⁰

Dancing with the Devil takes its inspiration from Cowell and Dillon but does not use them as characters. Instead, I invent two new people, using fiction to incorporate aspects of the lives of several British post-war transsexual people, and give a more complete picture of the levels of intrusion, derision and hostility that they faced. Its protagonists are transsexual woman Laura Miller, whose attempts to live in ‘stealth’ (not disclosing her gender history) and work as a model and film actress draw on April Ashley’s efforts to do the same before she was outed in the *Sunday People* in November 1961. Laura’s history as a female impersonator in New York nightclubs mirrors Ashley’s in Paris: both came from a working-class background, and both performed abroad as the Criminal Law Amendment Act was still in place, remaining so until 1967, and the police clamped down on London’s clandestine drag scene before Elizabeth II’s coronation in 1953. Miller’s love interest is Frank Bolton-Taylor, from an upper-class family trying to deal with the effects of Indian independence and the end of the British Empire on their Delhi-based tea company. Like Dillon, Frank is a transsexual man; unlike Dillon, his feelings for a transsexual woman are requited, but the threat – and eventuality – of exposure breaks them apart, in my first story to focus primarily on the relationship between trans people and the mass media, which became increasingly fraught during the second half of the 20th century.

The story engages with the main way transsexual (and it was almost exclusively transsexual at this stage) people responded to the stereotypes and scaremongering that made up most media coverage – by writing memoirs that explained their motivations and

experiences at length, telling their stories themselves rather than having sexologists frame them. It also aims to show the positive aspects of transsexual memoir, including the ones that induced me to use the form: its ability to form an emotive, educational connection with a reader that provides an alternative to the mainstream media, and records transphobia in the author's time. My story is presented as a chapter from Laura's memoir, also entitled *Dancing with the Devil*. Giving only the essentials of her backstory – that she was born in Coventry in 1927 and performed in New York before moving to London in 1955 – it charts Laura and Frank's efforts to avoid exposure, like chapters in *April Ashley's Odyssey* (1982) or *My Story* (1991) by Caroline Cossey, outed by the *News of the World* after appearing in the James Bond film *For Your Eyes Only* (1981). Its simple prose style resembles those books, especially in its use of caustic humour, outlining the hypocrisies of a society that persecutes them, rather than interrogating their structures.

There is an important time-lag in *Dancing with the Devil*, between 1957, when the recounted events take place, and 1970, when Laura's memoir was published. She notes: 'The Wolfenden Report hadn't landed yet, and if those actors were wondering about whether sleeping with me made them a "pansy", then they were probably worried that it could land them in gaol.'¹⁰¹ This Report, published in 1957, led to the partial decriminalisation of homosexuality in the UK ten years later, but the key legal issue here is that while Frank has been able to change his birth certificate, the more proletarian Laura hasn't. This brings one of the most important legal cases in British trans history into the story: *Corbett v. Corbett*, heard in 1969 with a decision in 1971, when Ashley's marriage to Lord Arthur Corbett was annulled as she was declared legally male, and thus not entitled to any divorce settlement.

This forms a crucial chapter in *April Ashley's Odyssey*, which follows the three-act structure in an unconventional way: the first third of Ashley's memoir covers her journey from a dockyard slum in Liverpool to 'the wizard of Casablanca' for surgery with Dr Georges Burou (who also operated on Morris); its remainder covers the time after she was outed, while she was filming for a non-speaking extra part in a Bob Hope movie. (That chapter ends on the bitter note: 'When the film was released they had even removed my credit from *The Road to Hong Kong*, the bastards'¹⁰² – an act of cruelty that stayed with me after I first read Ashley's memoir in 2002, and which is replicated in *Dancing*

with the Devil.) The ‘Divorce’ chapter is one of the book’s most striking, for its direct evocation of the indignity and humiliation that Ashley was made to suffer. The trial begins with the all-male courtroom deciding what to call her (they settled on ‘Mrs Corbett’) after a lengthy debate about how transsexuality has complicated ideas of ‘man’ and ‘woman’, and which category befitted ‘Mrs Corbett’. After Corbett presented the marriage as ‘no more than some squalid prank, some deliberate mockery of moral society perpetrated by a couple of queers for their own twisted amusement’, Ashley knew the case was lost, and so it proved.¹⁰³ The legal precedent set by this case remained law until the Gender Recognition Act (GRA) was passed in 2004 – Ashley’s memoir helped a generation of younger trans activists not just to understand but to *feel* what an injustice this was, and she remained an inspiration to the GRA campaigners (and to me) into the 21st century.

Dancing with the Devil is nowhere near as dense in allusions to real-life figures as *A Wo/Man of No Importance* or *Reconfiguration*. The only direct references to transgender history come when she contemplates the consequences of exposure, as Laura worries about going ‘back to Club 82 and the mob’ (a New York bar with a revue of female impersonators, reportedly run by the mafia) or ‘spending my life in the papers or on the television explaining myself like Christine Jorgensen’.¹⁰⁴ Stryker writes that Jorgensen ‘never considered herself [*an*] activist’ but became ‘aware of the historic role she had to play as a public advocate’ for transsexual people’ and reluctantly did so for years.¹⁰⁵ Laura doesn’t fancy this: the story opens with her having ‘had enough of telling people who I was, what I thought and how I felt, only for them to turn around and insist that I was wrong’.¹⁰⁶ (Perhaps there wasn’t space, culturally, for more than one advocate at this point, even spanning the Atlantic: when I broke into the mainstream media with my *Guardian* series, more than fifty years after *Dancing with the Devil* is set, I spoke to Roz Kaveney – three decades my senior, and discussed below – about the pitfalls of being typecast as ‘the transgender journalist’, especially as we both wanted to write about a range of subjects.) In my text, Laura functions as a composite of the handful of transsexual women whose beauty made them famous just after World War II, before the riots at Compton’s Cafeteria in San Francisco in 1966 and New York’s Stonewall Inn in 1969 made prominent a very different trans activism.

This includes Morris to an extent, but the British media frenzy over transsexual people lasted until the early 1980s, when a tabloid outed Caroline Cossey. In chapter 14 of *My Story*, Cossey describes the terror of hearing ‘That bastard Rankine from the *News of the World* has been snooping around the village again, asking questions’.¹⁰⁷ I borrowed many of the details for my story, despite the 25-year time difference: Cossey’s anxiety over what materials the reporter had and who might sell her out, her dilemma about whether to work with the newspaper, hope the story went away or to sue them, and her sense of violation when they exposed her, leaving her struggling with ‘an awareness that I was different, a freak, someone who could never hope to lead any kind of normal life.’¹⁰⁸ One important balance to strike in writing this collection was between optimistic and pessimistic endings – I wanted to convey that the trans community has often been oppressed whilst noting its resilience and its historical achievements. The end of *A Night at the Theatre* demonstrates the ways in which cross-dressers played the system to their advantage, whilst *A Wo/Man of No Importance* shows how that system strengthened itself in response, with fatal consequences. *Dancing with the Devil* has one of the saddest, as Laura and Frank’s efforts to mitigate the damage fail. Frank blames Laura for his exposure; they split up, and both leave the country. Frank’s plane leaves first: ‘I watched it take off,’ concludes Laura, ‘and the next I heard of him, ten years later, again through the papers, was in a tiny paragraph at the foot of the obituaries’.¹⁰⁹ Laura does not tell us how Frank died – the possibility of suicide lurks behind her words, which attempt to capture the sense of sadness I have often felt when reading about the short, sad lives of some of my trans inspirations (Dillon included). That no further stories of mine have such bleak endings is testament to how much progress trans people made in forming a community and improving their circumstances during the 1970s and beyond – something that could not have happened without the memoir writers of the mid-20th century educating the public (and especially younger transsexual people) about their experiences.

Never Going Underground

Amidst the bears and dykes, queers and straights who had crowded Albert Square – neither as packed nor as passionate as it was back in '88, but heart-warming nonetheless – I recognised him before he recognised me. Perhaps, though, that wasn't surprising.

“Johnny?”

“Oh my God ... Martin?”

“Marina.”

“Of course – Marina. Sorry, darling.” He introduced me to the man by his side, although I struggled to catch the name over the hullabaloo as a drag queen, dressed like someone from a John Waters film, daubed '28' over a Stagecoach bus windscreen in red paint. After several attempts, I heard that he was called Stuart. He kissed me on both cheeks, then asked Johnny:

“Is that the guy you used to go out with?”

“Less of the ‘guy’, please,” I replied, trying to make a joke of it.

“He – sorry, she’s – my ex, yeah,” said Johnny. “We met when we were fighting the Tories. The first time round.” He scanned me over. “You look well.”

“Thanks.”

“When did you ...”

“Back in the mid-Nineties.”

“Congratulations!” Johnny offered. “I hope you’re happier now?”

“In some ways. My parents won’t talk to me. Nor will my brother. Don’t miss him, mind.”

“Seeing anyone at the moment?” he asked.

“No, I’m single,” I told him. “I’m always single.”

“God, it’s been ages,” Johnny said. “Why don’t we wander into the Village and catch up over a beer? It’s on me.”

“Yeah, sounds nice.”

We walked across Piccadilly Gardens, still a construction site after the IRA bomb tore it apart, four years earlier. Johnny still held his ‘Scrap Section 28’ sign, and knocked on a window as we passed the bus stop.

“The twat who owns Stagecoach had given a million quid to the ‘Keep the Clause’ campaign,” Johnny snarled. “Fuckin’ Evangelicals – God can’t take ‘em back soon enough.”

As we headed towards Canal Street, Johnny asked: “When was the last time you were here?”

“I moved to Bristol after my surgery. The Clinic thought it’d be best to start against somewhere else. I’m not sure if they were right, but I’ve made some new friends. I had to come back for the protest, though, if just for old time’s sake.” Johnny smiled. “You still here, then?”

“I’m a Northerner and I’m proud!” Johnny put his hand on his heart. “I was in London for a while, working for Labour, and that’s how I met Stuart. But I’m a Manc in my heart, so I came back after we smashed the election.”

“Christ, it’s changed around here. For one thing, the sign reading ‘Anal Treet’ is gone.” “Long gone”, Johnny lamented. “It’s quiet now, but at the weekends it’s full of hen dos wanting strip-o-grams. The shiny bars with the fancy salads are all for the straights. It’s got even worse since *Queer as Folk* was on – so many tourists, and they’re not all on our side. Some of the old guard are clinging on though – Stuart and I went for a drink in the Rembrandt last night.”

“That’s still here?”

“Yeah. Napoleon’s and the New Union are, too.”

“Do they still have the same drag queens?” I asked.

“Yep. Different millennium, same songs, some of the same punters. The ones who survived.”

“Ah – bless them. I guess they enjoy it ...”

“Hey – you’ll like this place,” Johnny told me, pointing at Manhattan Show Bar. “It’s run by that woman from that BBC *Sex Change* documentary.”

“Oh yeah, she’s from round here, isn’t it?” I replied. “Scared the life out of me as a kid, that.”

Johnny said hi to the 7ft drag queen on the door, both the least intimidating and the most terrifying bouncer I’d ever seen – someone who would just as easily spike you with her tongue as with her stilettos. “That’s Truly Scrumptious,” Johnny told me. “Or Ken to his mates.” Inside, there were all these young bar staff – “trannies”, Johnny called them – pulling pints. The one who served us looked about 19, she seemed so at ease in her pretty pink top, long brown hair (which might have been a wig), short skirt and fishnets, and immediately, I wished that Manhattan’s had been around in my day. None of the tables were free, so we propped up the bar, and Stuart asked me to tell him about how Johnny and I met ...

Fallowfield, Manchester, January 1988

We’d driven all the way from Reading in silence, Dad and me. I always thought he’d guessed, the way he didn’t invite me to the football or the cinema like with Mark. But he’d never talk about it, not even that ghastly line, *it’s just a phase* ...

He did drop me at Oak House, but he was off back to Reading once we’d taken my stuff to my room. I was the first to arrive, so he wouldn’t have met any of my new flatmates anyway. They put me in all-male halls because I got my forms in late. Not my fault – they never gave me any – but I ended up with some absolute wreckheads. They did every drug under the sun – dope, pills, E’s, whizz, you name it – and liked their lager too, Athletics Union social on Wednesday, the Hacienda on Saturday. It wasn’t like that down south: the guys with crew cuts got wasted down their local, and the gays who spent twenty quid on their hair went to London. Anyway – this lot reckoned they were hard enough to hold their own at the clubs, even in the Gunchester days, but really, the gangs only went after each other.

Immediately, I realised that the only privacy I'd get was when I locked my door, and even then, I'd be expected to hang out a lot – so none of the secret cross-dressing that I'd done at home. In any case, I'd only brought my make-up. I wore bits of it – nail polish, eyeliner, mascara – just to test the water. Mostly, they ignored it. Rob would ask if I was into Bowie. He liked the Berlin albums as much as all that house and rave stuff, and made me feel a little less alone. Otherwise, it wasn't great – I thought uni would be talking about books, joining a band, getting into politics, but they weren't up for protests or even much discussion, and a couple voted for Thatcher in '87. *Maybe it was those Tory billboards saying that Labour would make straights go to camps with gay sports days, as if that would ever happen – bollocks to sport and bollocks to all the fucking tossers who like it ...*

So, first thing I did at Freshers' Week was join the Gay & Lesbian Society. Not that I really thought I *was* gay, but I liked men. Some men. Maybe I was bisexual. Maybe I was a transvestite, and maybe that made me gay, I didn't know. I just didn't like being a guy, and thought someone there might understand ... But I went on the first social and didn't click with anyone, so I tried to make friends with the other English students. That didn't work either, so when I got back after Christmas, I tried again. I found a flyer at the Union, and a couple of nights later, put on my make-up and got the 42 into town. I kept my head down as some scally on the top deck kept yelling "Pete Burns!" at me. When I got to the top of Oxford Road, I asked a woman how to get to Canal Street, and she stared at me like something a cat had dragged out of the bloody gutter. Then I saw these guys, some with bleached hair and crop tops, and others with skinheads and leather trousers.

- *Excuse me ... do you know where the Rembrandt is?*

- *"Excuse me!"* one of them said, taking the piss out of my accent. *Welcome to the North, babe! We know where it is – but wouldn't you rather come with us?*

- *Well ...* I said, checking them out. *Let's see ...*

I walked with them, and they asked me how old I was, where I was from, the usual. They were going to Napoleon's, but I decided to stick with the Rembrandt. I'd never been anywhere like this before: I stood outside, trying to peer at the punters to figure out what they might be like, but you couldn't see through the windows. I stepped inside and cast

my eye around. It was like the pubs in Reading – except with posters for drag queens instead of covers bands, pop instead of rock on the jukebox, staff who *didn't* stare at you like you'd come round at Christmas and pissed on their kids. They were playing Dead or Alive, *You Spin Me Round*, and as I went to the bar, these older men gave me the eye. I can't lie: it was intimidating but in a way they made me feel sexy, a little more than ever before, even though I didn't fancy them ...

There was only one gang that could've been students – twenty years younger than everyone else. It was called the Gay & Lesbian Society, but something was missing.

- *Is this just for guys?*

- *The girls split, I was told. They prefer the dyke bars.*

- *And they're more into politics.*

- *Maybe I should join them, I joked. Well, half-joked.*

- *I wouldn't try that, duck.*

- *They're strictly women-only.*

- *Why?*

- *Some of them hate men, a few of them really have it in for trannies.*

- *Seriously? What's the problem?*

- *I don't know. Apparently, the most "male" thing you can do is cut your dick off.*

- *SIMON!* said someone. *That's not what happens, and even if it was, that's bloody insensitive.*

- *Sorry, Joanie, replied Simon. I just can't think of anything worse.*

- *Don't do it, then.* He turned to me. *Sorry about that. One Bacardi Breezer and he's a fucking 'mare. Just ignore him. Like we do.* Simon glared at him, and he smiled back. *I'm Johnny.*

No airs or graces, no sense that he was acting out some preconception of what gay men were meant to be like. Just a smart, funny, friendly lad. And *dreamy*, with his blonde hair and blue eyes ... When everyone else was dancing, we got talking. About how his parents

never gave up on him ‘coming home with a lass’ and how he split with his first long-term boyfriend who’d voted Tory. *One of those self-hating queers*, Johnny said. And about how he’d been with his little sister in the only gay pub in Rochdale when it got firebombed.

Johnny gave me this leaflet. It had little bombs round the edges – his idea, he said, after *Capital Gay*’s offices got burned down and the Conservative MP for Lancaster proclaimed that it was “right that there should be an intolerance of evil”. It said STOP THE CLAUSE in foreboding letters, above: FIGHT FOR GAY AND LESBIAN RIGHTS.

- *It’s not just that the Tories want us to die*, said Johnny. *They want us never to live at all.*
- *What do you mean?*
- *They’re trying to pass a law making it illegal to talk about being gay in schools. Or even have books about it in libraries. You’re not gonna let them – are you?*

Thatcher’s plummy, fingernail-on-blackboard voice rang in my ears. *Children who need to be taught to respect traditional moral values are being taught that they have an inalienable right to be gay*. I pictured my parents, and maybe Johnny’s, nodding along.

- *Of course I’m not going to fucking let them.*
- *Come to the meeting*, he insisted. *I’ll introduce you to everyone.*

*

I loitered outside the Students’ Union in a velvet blouse and a little mascara. Johnny jumped off the bus, beaming as he saw how many people were entering. I went to shake his hand.

- *Oh, for fuck’s sake, darling – gimme a hug*. He smiled. *If this lot don’t all hate Thatcher yet, they will soon*, he guessed, and we went inside.

All the boys were on the left and all the girls on the right. No butches or femmes. Then I realised that the only time I'd seen lesbians was in *The Killing of Sister George*, and that was twenty years old. These were all T-shirts and trousers (but not dungarees, like in *Daily Mail* cartoons), badges with slogans, short hair, no make-up. The guys looked mainly 'straight-acting'.

- *Watch out for the older ones, warned Johnny. They might be PIE.*

- *PIE?*

- *Paedophile Information Exchange. They were big in the Seventies, but a few of 'em are still skulking around. He paused. Or they might be the Socialist Workers' Party.*

- *How can you tell?*

- *Wait until they offer you a newspaper.*

As we laughed, two blokes piped up behind us.

- *All the dykes keeping to themselves as usual.*

- *Can still smell the fish though.*

Johnny turned.

- *Mate! Fuckin' 'ell! Did you learn nothing from Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners?*

- *Minors? The bloke replied. You're not PIE 'n' all, are ya?*

- *They've shown solidarity by coming, Johnny told them. We should offer them the same.*

Johnny turned back, shaking his head. Luckily, Hugh – the chairman of the North West Council for Lesbian & Gay Equality – started the meeting. There was dead silence as he talked about how one in five gay people had attempted suicide; about how Manchester's notoriously Evangelical chief of police, James Anderton, had described gay people, drug addicts and prostitutes who had AIDS as "swirling in a human cesspit of their own making"; about Lord Denning, who boasted about personally sending gay men to prison before decriminalisation; about there being no mainstream gay press to counter this, and that Jack Cunningham, Labour's Shadow Home Secretary, supported the Clause, even

though it was part of a Local Government Act that would strengthen the Tories by persuading bigots that public services should be cut.

Johnny got up.

- The Tories have moved the goalposts, he said. London councils are simply trying to provide positive images of gay couples, and Thatcher calls it 'promotion of homosexuality'. If Labour won't fight her – we will!

There was applause: he returned my smile, and then a woman shared a story about her friend with mental health problems.

- He had a breakdown and checked into his local clinic. They asked him some basic questions, but as soon as he mentioned his boyfriend, they packed him off to Wythenshawe Hospital, slung him in a room on his own and told the staff not to touch him. When I went to see him, they made me wear a gown, like he had the bloody plague. And Thatcher thinks kids are learning too much about gay people.

- Say something about school, urged Johnny.

- We got told nothing about sexuality, I said. Every day, kids at my comprehensive in Reading called me "faggot" or "bender", gave me no end of shit for liking books more than football, chucked things at me because I wasn't into girls. People die of the ignorance this breeds, and no-one – gay, straight, whatever – should stand for it.

And there were cheers all around the room! *Whoa*, I thought. Johnny took my hand as I sat down: *That was fuckin' brilliant!* Hugh told us how we could support the campaign – flyering, writing to the Lords, getting friends involved. There would be a march into town, a rally, and a festival with bands and speeches.

- Let's do this! Johnny cried as we left.

- Can we talk at yours?

- *Sorry luv, I'm back at my mam's at the moment. Only way I can do my MA. What about yours?*

- *My flatmates might be around, not sure they're cool with it.*

- *What are they going to do? Hold a Straight Pride march? Come on, it'll be fine.*

So, we got the bus together to Oak House. I told him about how my flatmates would say things like *nothing against gays, but I hate the ones who mince about*, and thought that *the camp ones* were a put-on. He took my hand again, subtly, and said he didn't really get on with the *ultra-gays* either. He said that like my flatmates, he liked his E's and went to the footy occasionally, Rochdale or Manchester City, but that their comments sounded like textbook homophobia.

- *I think everyone's out*, I said as we opened the door, to silence and darkness. We grinned at each other, went to my room and shut the door. Finally, we could be intimate with each other, and Johnny put his hands on my shoulders ...

- *You know I'm a transvestite*, I told him.

- *I knew you liked a bit of glam*, he replied. *I didn't realise you were that into it.*

- *When I was 14, my older brother caught me wearing my mum's dress. I thought he was out and I was putting on her lipstick. The fucker took a photo and told me that if I didn't give him my pocket money every week, he'd show everyone we knew.*

- *Jesus*, he sighed, sitting on my bed. *Still – you're here now.*

- *Yeah ... I like guys. It's just, I've never said this to anyone before ...* I sat next to him. *I think I'd feel sexier ... As a woman ...*

- *You want to dress up?* I nodded. *Well ... first time for everything ...*

I put some black tights over my shaved legs and boxers. Johnny helped me put on a cheap bra, which I filled with socks. Then he helped me pull a purple dress over my body, and I stood in front of the mirror and fitted a long brown wig from Affleck's Palace.

- *Will you do my lips?* I asked.

- *What's the point?* He kissed me, and then picked up my lipstick and did it anyway. *Gorgeous, darling. Now, what's your name?*

- *Mesmerelda*, I told him, laughing awkwardly as he practically doubled up.

- *Mesme-RELDA!* He screamed. *Are you angling for a slot at Napoleon's?*

- *Okay, it's a funny name, but I'm not a drag queen. I'm not even sure if I'm gay.*

- *Really?* Johnny asked, looking at my crotch.

Then he kissed me, and I thought: *Oh God, my chance has come at last ...* But just as I took off his jeans, I heard the door. My flatmates were back from some club, wankered, screaming and shouting. *Just ignore them*, Johnny told me, and we carried on, but they started fighting outside my room – I couldn't tell if they were playing or not. One of them shoved this guy Barry, and the lumbering oaf crashed through my door, which we'd forgotten to fucking lock. He collapsed onto my floor, looked up at me and went:

- *Fuck me! That's sick!*

- *What?*

- *Look!* Barry yelled, pointing at me giving Johnny a BJ.

- *Dressed as a fucking slapper, too!*

I froze. Johnny shot flaming daggers at them.

- *Whatever, I'm out now*, I whispered to Johnny.

- *Not getting up, Bazza?*

Barry muttered something and stormed out. Then I shut the door, and got back to Johnny.

*

That Saturday, we planned to go clubbing together. Johnny helped me pick out a new outfit in the Northern Quarter – black cocktail dress, bag and purse, size 7 heels. You

should have seen the looks on the little old ladies' faces when we got those! Especially when they asked *Are these for your girlfriend* and Johnny said *No, it's for her*, pointing at me.

We went back to Oak House as I didn't want to get changed in town.

- *What do you think of the pearls?*

- *They make you look like me Nan!* Johnny laughed. *If you want to be a drag queen, camp it up, but if you wanna blend in, calm it down.*

- *Alright, I'll leave the pearls. What about the lippy?*

- *Hmm – maybe a touch*, he said, dabbing my lips with some bog roll.

I didn't try to hide it from my flatmates – there was no point now. They'd stopped talking to me anyway, apart from Rob, so Johnny called a gay-friendly cabbie, and we decided to wait outside. As we got onto the streets, these lads outside Gaffs started hooting and wolf-whistling at me. But it was worth it – we kissed for most of the journey.

Watch out for Anderton's storm-troopers, said Johnny as we walked towards Canal Street. When we got there, it was packed – the bars had STOP THE CLAUSE posters up, people were out drinking and if the cops had tried to nick anyone, they'd have started another Stonewall. There were more women than I expected, and no caustic remarks about *trannies*. So, we chinwagged with the drinkers, downed a few in Napoleon's and went back to mine, spending the Sunday in my room, door open, with lots of pens and card.

Rob asked what we were plotting. I explained about Clause 28. *I know, it's fuckin' disgustin'*, he replied, so we told him to come to the rally. *See?* Johnny shouted. *That woman's gone too far – the straights won't stand for it.*

- *Well, some of them*, I said.

- *It'll grow*, Johnny replied. *Trust me.*

The next evening, Johnny and I attended the next meeting. There were scores of people going into the Town Hall – *Told you*, said Johnny – and it took ages for Hugh to get us to

sit down and shut up, it was so buzzing. Hugh mentioned celebrities who were supporting us – not just the usual ones like Ken Livingstone and Peter Tatchell (*Both good Labour men*, Johnny whispered) but soap stars, musicians and actors – Ian McKellen had come out in response to the Bill, we were informed to rapturous cheers, and he probably wouldn't be the last.

The first vote concerned Viraj Mendes – an asylum seeker in Hulme, whom the government planned to deport. The radicals – mainly the SWP – wanted us to campaign on his behalf, to *build more solidarity*, like with the miners. To my surprise, Johnny voted against. *We don't want to confuse things*, he said, after I voted *for*. *More people will back us if it's just about the Clause*. So, the meeting decided not to campaign for Mendes – I forget the exact result, but it was a clear majority.

The next item? I knew what a palaver this was going to be when Hugh uttered the words *Clone Zone advert* and Johnny threw his head back, sighing. Immediately, the room felt heavier; something had to break. As soon as Hugh spoke about how much money the shop had given to the campaign, I heard a woman's voice cry out:

- *He looks like he's got a bleedin' pineapple down his knickers!*

Absolute guffaws – from the right-hand side of the room. Which was where, I clocked, all the lesbians were. A few guys let out a giggle, soon stifled by disapproving glances from the more 'serious' activists.

- *There were separate meetings about this*, Johnny said.

- *And you didn't tell me?*

He looked apologetic. *I only found out later*.

They displayed the advert on an overhead projector. Now, the room was dominated by a huge image of a bloke in his Y-fronts, with a boner the size of the Free Trade Hall, scheduled to feature prominently in the Festival programme. You couldn't help but laugh, except that it nearly tanked our movement – a cacophony of voices screaming things like:

- *They've given us so much support!*
- *They can support us without waving their giant dicks in everyone's faces!*
- *It's about having a right to our sexuality!*
- *Your sexuality! What about ours?*
- *This is supposed to be about gay and lesbian rights, not bloody porn!*
- *All the banners say Gay and Lesbian, what more d'ya want?*

A man stood up.

- *Christ! Everyone CALM DOWN! Fuck me!* The projector was turned off and the sniping fell silent. *I remember before 1967, he said. Before decriminalisation. People thought that gay men were predators, potential rapists, obsessed with sex. Lots still think that – listen to what's coming out of the Tory Party, or the flamin' Manchester police. I know we need to stand up to them, but this sort of thing will only give them ammunition.*

Hugh banged the table.

- *We need to settle this democratically. All those in favour of keeping the Clone Zone advert, put up your hands.*

Johnny's arm shot up.

- *We need to be able to celebrate our sexuality, said Johnny. Otherwise, why are we here?*

- *And those against?*

Tentatively, I raised my hand – along with everyone on the right-hand side, and a few on ours.

- *If the women don't feel welcome, it's not their movement, I whispered. And I don't think it's worth alienating them over this.*

A voice behind me interjected: *You what?*

- *I can see his point, Johnny told him. We can't be divided right now. And maybe we do need to be 'respectable'.*

- *If only a bit, I added.*

Hugh asked for abstentions, and then announced that the advert would not be used. There were cheers from the women, and a few murmurs from the men. Johnny gave me a half-smile, eyebrows raised. I took his hand, and we moved on to the final item.

- *Andy Bell and Jimmy Somerville wish to perform at the Festival in drag. Some on the Committee feel this could confuse the issues around sexuality, and these sorts of drag shows are demeaning to women. We are sure that they'll accept our invitation even if we would prefer-*

- *If we pulled the advert on grounds of taste, someone butted in, we should pull this too.*

- *Wait! Hugh continued. Others felt that we shouldn't censor anyone's sexuality, however they want to express it – otherwise we're as bad as the government-*

- *But the tabloids will have a field day!*

I stood up.

- *Look, it's simple. We respected the women's opinion on the advert, and we should respect the transsexuals' opinion on this.*

- *There aren't any bloody transsexuals, a bloke yelled.*

- *Why not? I asked.*

- *Maybe they're just not interested, a woman answered.*

- *If there are any transsexuals here, please raise your hands, came a voice from in front of us.*

- *For fuck's sake, shouted Johnny. It's not a sodding witch hunt.*

- *All those who think Bell and Somerville should not perform in drag, please raise your hands.*

Most of the room put up their arms. I didn't, and nor did Johnny. I slumped into my chair.

- *Sorry, darling. But if we respected the decision on everything else ...*

I sighed as Hugh passed the motion and concluded the meeting. As we left, a woman came up to me. She was a bit older than most people there, slightly dowdy, softly spoken.

- *Hi, I'm Philippa. I just wanted to thank you for speaking up.* There was an awkward silence. *If you're interested, our group meets every other Thursday. Maybe I'll see you there.*

She handed me a card, headed 'TV/TS Support Centre', with a PO Box address and a phone number. I thanked her, and she walked away. I kissed Johnny on the cheek and got the bus back to Oak House, alone, trying not to cry.

*

We found each other outside Jilly's Rockworld, Philippa and I, slightly ahead of time. As the marchers strode into view, some time after we heard the claps, cheers, whistles, even drummers and saxophonists on the horizon, the chants of 'We're here! We're queer! We're not going shopping!' she asked if we were waiting for my *boyfriend*.

- *We decided to meet for the festival,* I told her.

- *Oh ... what's up?*

- *The last meeting. I don't think he got why I was so upset about the Bell and Somerville thing.*

- *Why? You're not a drag queen, are you?*

- *Well ... no ... But I thought he'd understand why I didn't think it was fair ...*

- *Maybe it's for the best,* sighed Philippa. *Maybe they'd make everyone look ridiculous.*

- *Yeah, they probably would.*

We let ourselves be sucked into the surging crowd, seeing men hold hands in the street, lesbian couples with children, handwritten signs demanding EQUAL RIGHTS NOW, or declaring that LESBIAN AND GAY RIGHTS ARE HUMAN RIGHTS, that WE'RE OUT AND WE'RE STAYING OUT, SWP placards and banners of groups from Bradford, London, Newcastle that had joined us. I held up my NEVER GOING UNDERGROUND logo and walked along the fringes, earnestly.

- *Giv' us a smile, luv! A stranger accosted me. I know it's a protest, but you can still have fun!*

I struggled to turn my lips upwards, unconvincingly, and then turned to Philippa.

- *Johnny doesn't fancy me as a woman. He said it was fun once, but it doesn't turn him on.*

- *He's a gay man – what do you expect?*

- *This is more important to him right now.* I waved my hand across the crowd. *He says he can't concentrate on a relationship. Maybe we'll work things out, but ...*

But I couldn't help but join in the chant: *What do we want? Equal rights! When do we want them? Now!* We turned onto Albert Square, just as one of the organisers, Kürşad Karamanoğlu, stoked up the audience: *If London is New York, then welcome to San Francisco!*

- *Christ alive, said Philippa, look!*

It was astounding, pulsating crowds as far as the eye could see, some listening attentively, others cheering and whooping as a man with a megaphone proudly told us that twenty thousand people had attended. I clapped along as we were told this was the largest national demonstration in Manchester in the last twenty years, and that the police *were not the most numerate* as they had planned for fifteen. *Stick that in your stupid pipe and suck it, Anderton!* I heard as Philippa and I tried to push towards the front. Then, under

the Manchester University Gay & Lesbians Students banner, a familiar voice: *I tried to tell this kid in my Maths class that I fancied him when I was 14, but I bottled it. Probably would've got my head kicked in anyway-*

I tapped his shoulder.

- *Mesmerelda?*

- *Marina.*

- *I'm so glad to see you!*

To my surprise, he gave me a massive hug, but I knew from the way that he kissed my cheek that things weren't quite the same.

- *This is incredible! We even got a Labour councillor to stick his neck out!*

He joined the applause as Michael Cashman from *EastEnders* came on and shouted *I'm here ... because I'm proud!* He was jumping up and down, embracing everyone around him, almost hyperventilating – I'd never seen anyone so ecstatic. So, we stayed together as Cashman talked about *ordinary men and women made extraordinary by society's focus on what we do in bed*, and it was inspirational, really, to see so many people agreeing with him, all of whom fell quiet as he talked about how people could gas or shoot us, but that as long as people continued to procreate, homosexuality would exist. Then, two actors from *Brookside* came on, well received despite playing Scousers: Sue Johnston compared the clause to the Nazi book-burning, before Steve Parry screamed: *Who the hell is going to get a closet big enough for all of us?*

- *There bloody well ain't any n'all*, beamed Johnny, putting his arm around me.

- *Not once most of you are out*, I said.

- *What do you mean?* I hesitated. *You're out now, aren't you?*

- *I don't feel out*, I replied. *Not really.*

- *Do you want to be a woman?*

- *Maybe. I don't know. Perhaps we should talk about it later.*

From his silence, I knew that we would never survive something this colossal; it might be best that we try to be friends now, rather than tear ourselves apart further down the line. After Philippa left, we spent the evening together, but I found it impossible to enjoy the Communards or Erasure as much as everyone around me seemed to, and Ian McKellen's recital of Thomas More, beautiful as it was, didn't quite strike me in the same way as it did Johnny. At the end, we kissed, but it just wasn't like the old days any more, and I went home alone – seeing Rob with his girlfriend when I got in, hearing him say that they both had a brilliant time at the protest, just made it feel even more bittersweet ...

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“So that's it,” I told Stuart. I noticed that Manhattan's had cleared out, and that the barmaid (who, she told me, was called Marlene) had been listening to most of my story.

“I guess things are better now.”

“Yeah, but it's still not great,” Marlene interjected. “Some kids in a car chucked a load of eggs at Truly a while back. They missed, but you can still see it out the front.”

“And the local rag is still at it,” said Johnny. “They picked out a photo of a couple of leather queens that Marketing Manchester had put in a brochure and ran a headline saying, ‘Is this how we want to promote our city?’ Of course, they encouraged everyone to say no. People are getting scared to hold hands again.”

“Tony will sort it,” replied Stuart, and Johnny put his arm around him. “The Loony Left might not have stopped the Clause, but he will.”

“Perhaps, but we did the groundwork,” I sigh. “It's weird how these things pan out.”

“What do you mean?” asked Marlene.

I explained how the Clause, introduced to silence and separate us, had brought us all together, and how the campaign had led me somewhere entirely different to most of my comrades. I told Johnny, Stuart and Marlene about how I'd gone to Philippa's TV/TS group, which had met in Canal Street, until I moved away, and how they had supported me when my parents disowned me, and when old friends like Rob from halls turned their backs on me.

Marlene in particular looked apprehensive, and I didn't want to leave her on that note.

"Now, things are ..." I hesitated. "I don't know if they're better, but they're not getting worse. I guess they're just different."

"And they'll change more once we finally get rid of Thatcher's law."

Johnny smiled, and hugged me nearly as hard as he had when we'd first met outside the Student Union. "It's been so wonderful seeing you again. Keep in touch, yeah? Stuart and I have bought a flat just round the corner – come and stay whenever you like."

"Absolutely. And if you're ever in Bristol – feel free to do the same."

I watched Johnny and Stuart leave, hand in hand, and then saw that Marlene had brought over another gin and tonic. I asked if it was for me: she said it was, and shook her head, smiling, when I reached into my handbag. "You're very sweet, but I should really go," I told her.

I left my email address, kissed her on both cheeks and then headed to Manchester Piccadilly station, boarding the train back to Bristol with more hope than I had since ... well, I honestly can't remember.

Never Going Underground and the gaps in LGBT history

The 1960s and 1970s were a time of huge changes for LGBT people in the western, English-speaking world. The riots at Compton's Cafeteria in San Francisco in 1966, and at New York's Stonewall Inn three years later – both led by trans people of colour – kickstarted the modern LGBT rights movement and confirmed the US as the world's leader in trans activism and sexology. The German sexological scene never fully recovered from the Nazi period: Harry Benjamin, who met Hirschfeld in Germany before the First World War, had relocated to New York in 1914. He carried on working on gender identity for the next sixty years, publishing the influential *Transsexual Phenomenon* in 1966, promoting 'transsexual' to distinguish people such as Jorgensen, who sought surgery, from 'transvestites' who did not; he also helped to set the conventions by which Gender Identity Clinics (GICs) facilitated transitions via hormones, surgery and a 'Real Life Experience' of living in one's chosen gender for a set period. By the 1970s, sufficient numbers had transitioned for gender identity and sexuality to have become widely understood as distinct. This led to tensions in post-Stonewall liberation movements, mostly led by gay men, whose alliances with lesbians grew increasingly fractious, and who often did not want to associate with trans people – especially when trying to be 'respectable'.

The emergence of 'transsexuals' and 'transvestites' as distinguishable categories meant that by the mid-1980s, the British tabloids became less interested in outing individuals (unless they were already prominent). The generation after Ashley, Cowley and Dillon had a different set of political problems: how to access hormones and surgery on the National Health Service; the need for official gender recognition and employment protection; and which alliances to form in pursuit of their goals. As in the US, neither were very welcome in Gay & Lesbian or feminist movements – which, in the UK, could start to breathe after the partial decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1967 – and the American second wave feminist tactic of setting up women-only spaces, and then excluding transsexual women from them, was also imported. However, 'transsexuals' and 'transvestites' were often reluctant to co-operate in activist movements, with each side feeling that the other brought them into disrepute, although there were a handful of British

organisations established, such as the Beaumont Society and the TV/TS Support Group, before the first National Transvestite and Transsexual Conference in Leeds in 1974.¹¹⁰

The BBC's landmark TV documentary *A Change of Sex* (1979-1980), which followed Julia Grant through the reassignment process at the GIC at Charing Cross Hospital, showed just how many physical, institutional and social challenges the community had to face – and became notorious amongst the transsexual community (and beyond) for its depiction of the cold and obstructive attitudes of the medical gatekeepers who were supposed to help them. In the US and UK, clinics tended to tell people to 'pass' and disappear, keeping their transsexual history to themselves – which, as Sandy Stone noted in *The Empire Strikes Back*, made it 'difficult to generate a counter-discourse' that would ignite any transgender politics or culture.¹¹¹ During the 1980s, it became harder for 'TV/TS' people to organise as the HIV/AIDS crisis struck. The Reagan-Thatcher axis that pulled Anglo-American politics to the right demonised LGBT people (and especially gay men) through the tabloid press, and denied them effective treatment and support, forcing the movement away from a politics based on opposing heteronormativity and towards one based on assimilation.

In the UK, the 'counter-discourse' coalesced around opposition to Clause 28 of the Local Government Act, which aimed to ban 'banned the "promotion" of homosexuality by regional authorities and in Britain's schools', drafted in response to a media panic about children "being taught that they have an inalienable right to be gay", as Margaret Thatcher told the Conservative Party conference in 1987.¹¹² It is this movement that I explore from a transsexual perspective in *Never Going Underground*, which borrows its title from a slogan used at the demonstration against the Clause held in Manchester in February 1988. It was commissioned for an anthology of short stories about protests throughout British history (and so is the only piece discussed here to have been published) and covers a subject close to my heart. My schooling coincided almost exactly with when Section 28 was in place: it was passed soon after I began primary school and was repealed just after I completed my History degree in Manchester in 2003, and so it prevented me from accessing any meaningful information or discussion about gender identity or sexuality during my teenage years, when I desperately needed it.

Never Going Underground is, formally, my most conventional story – a first-person narrative (with a reliable storyteller) that does not attempt to imitate any other genre of writing. In a strange way, though, it *does* follow Ames’ three-act structure, in that its protagonist moves from a small town (Reading) to a big city (Manchester) and makes realisations there that lead her to transition from male to female. However, the process itself is elided: the story begins with Marina returning to Manchester in July 2000 for another protest against Section 28, which Tony Blair’s Labour government were then striving to repeal. There, she bumps into Johnny, with whom she had a brief fling around the first protest, and who recognises her despite not having seen her since before her transition. This leads Marina to recount her relationship with Johnny, who knew her as ‘Martin’ in 1988, and how disagreements over how to fight Clause 28 highlighted fundamental differences between them as a gay man and a proto-transsexual woman, and how trans people were marginalised within political circles. In many ways, it blurs the lines between fiction and autobiography, drawing extensively from my own experiences in a similar fashion to Roz Kaveney’s *Tiny Pieces of Skull* – a strong influence on my story.

Kaveney’s novel was written in 1988, a year after Stone’s manifesto (which was not widely read until after its second revision was distributed via online networks in the early 1990s), but not published until 2015, after the ‘Transgender Tipping Point’ and other changes in Anglo-American trans culture that sprang from Stone’s essay and the wave of writing that followed. Kate Bornstein’s lament that transsexual and transgender people were only able to publish autobiographies about their suffering was born out here – indeed, Bornstein’s statement may have been informed by her long-term friendship with Kaveney – as Kaveney explains that ‘I submitted [*Tiny Pieces of Skull*] to various publishers [*in 1988*], and at least two editorial directors were keen enough on it to take it to full editorial meetings, but it didn’t sell. One editorial director said it was cold, heartless and amoral and another that his house had been publishing ‘too many quasi-experimental novels about sexual deviants’’.¹¹³

Perhaps this director’s sense that the market would not sustain Kaveney’s work was informed, on some level, by the transsexual memoir falling out of fashion, leading him/her to conclude that readers had no appetite for *any* trans issues. With the NHS

transition process standardised by the late 1980s and explicated on the occasionally-repeated *Change of Sex*, neither publishers nor transsexual people seemed to display much interest in re-telling that story, but various forms of prejudice (manifested in preconceptions about what would sell) conspired to keep less familiar trans narratives away from wider audiences. By this point, several popular films had portrayed characters with gender identity issues, often associating them with murder (as in *Psycho* or *Dressed to Kill*) or other criminal activity, but few novels, plays, films or other works had emerged that explored transsexual or transgender subjectivity in any depth without using transition as a superstructure. *Tiny Pieces of Skull*, which drew heavily on Kaveney's attempts to get by in Chicago in the late 1970s and 1980s, taking in low-skilled jobs and sex work, was an attempt to plug the gap in representations of gender-variant living after the emergence of a nascent trans community. That it was rejected, despite its pioneering account of discrimination and solidarity, and the subtle intelligence with which it illuminates the minutiae of gender-variant living at the time, illustrates how large the gap was between trans authors and literary gatekeepers. This gap, however, was bridged by theory and activism rather than fiction, even though the barriers between that and memoir have often been porous. At this time, perhaps, even small and/or independent publishers (although Kaveney did not specify which ones) did not feel ready to commission such genre-busting work from such a marginal subject-position.

Kaveney's novel is one of the earliest to explore a trans *community*, placing trans characters in dialogue with each other in a way that *The Well of Loneliness* (as its title implies) did not. With its third-person narration, it avoided the 'I' of memoir, clarifying the text's status as a novel rather than blurring the lines between autobiography and fiction like Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues* (1993) – discussed later in this paper. It also avoided the by-now clichéd three-act transition narrative structure described by Jonathan Ames, focusing on the challenges that its characters faced in the present, declining any use of flashback to their childhoods. Indeed, it is quite a conservative novel, stylistically speaking – there is no obvious effort to create a literary *form* that ties *transgender* to *trans-genre*, despite the 'quasi-experimental' jibe cited above. Kaveney does not attempt anything as audacious as Anne Garréta's *Sphinx*, published in French in 1986 and then in English translation in 2015, which studiously avoided using any gender markers for the

two lovers at its core in a restraint set by the *avant-garde* Oulipo group, of which Garréta was a member.

For scholars of trans literature, *Sphinx* is interesting primarily for its form, and *Tiny Pieces of Skull* almost exclusively for its content. Kaveney's experiences of transsexual living frequently come into the text, not just in describing the sensations that an outsider might expect a transsexual woman to feel in a transphobic society – such as protagonist Annabelle's anxieties about not 'passing' after removing her make-up for facial hair removal, or the voice in her head telling her 'that she was a monster who no-one would ever love'.¹¹⁴ (Certainly, I know these feelings all too well.) However, *Tiny Pieces of Skull* does not just offer insight into specific difficulties of gender-variant living; importantly, it also describes ways in which more universal aspects of life can be complicated by being trans. At one point, Annabelle implies that, as a foreigner in Chicago, people notice that she is English before they 'read' her as trans.¹¹⁵ There are always different types of 'passing' in play at the same time, and Annabelle's Englishness affects her relationship with other people – in particular the police, who arrest her as part of a drugs bust – as much as does her gender identity.¹¹⁶ Kaveney's most admirably honest contribution to trans literature is to write about how internalised transphobia (and other prejudices) affect her protagonists' relationships with each other. The scene where Annabelle falls out with her friend Natasha over 'respectability', because Natasha does not want to jeopardise hard-won social acceptance by becoming associated with 'low-rent trash' (as sex worker Annabelle self-deprecatingly calls herself) is one of the strongest in the novel, showing how hard it is for the trans women to sustain their self-made support networks and escape their exhausting, dangerous 'outsider' positions.¹¹⁷

Like *Tiny Pieces of Skull*, *Never Going Underground* explores this marginality, looking at some of the ideas, structures and processes that kept trans people in the shadows. (It also hints at the marginalisation of the left of the Labour Party, who were the driving parliamentary forces in the anti-Clause movement, by the Blairite/centrist forces who took over the party during the 1990s – especially relevant in 2017, when the left had asserted itself within Labour and, as I wrote the story, achieved an unexpectedly impressive General Election result.) *Never Going Underground* takes place in a framework created almost entirely by gay men (within a deeply homophobic society), and

it's telling that while there are many cultural references that situate it in late 1980s and early 2000s Manchester, providing a stronger sense of place than in (say) *Reconfiguration*, only one of these references mentions someone who identified as transsexual or transgender: Julia Grant, who used her *Change of Sex* fame as a platform to open a couple of bars, primarily for trans people, in Manchester's Canal Street district (which had long been famous in the city for its gay community, but became more prominent – and commercialised – after Channel 4's series *Queer as Folk*, set in 'the village', was broadcast in 1999).

I frequented these bars during my time in Manchester in 2000-2003, particularly Manhattan's, where Marina tells her story. There, she finds herself feeling envious of, and yet hopeful about, the young trans women behind the bar – one of many aspects of the story informed by my experience. I won't dwell on this, as reading *Never Going Underground* beside the opening chapters of *Trans: A Memoir* will illustrate the links between my fiction and autobiography, and especially between Marina's efforts to understand the city's student culture and gay scene, her gender dysphoria and how to deal with transphobia and misogyny. So again, the question emerges – why rewrite this as a short story?

Again, the answer is that my experience can be brought to bear on a historical moment, and used to illuminate it in a different way, countering the suggestion that just because trans people were not prominent within the movement doesn't mean they weren't involved – and asking *why* such trans people have not been remembered. My use of fiction allowed me to combine my own experiences of marginalisation in early 21st century Manchester with the memories of veterans of the 1988 protest, charting what had changed in the city's student and gay/LGBT cultures, and what had not. Using fiction, I hoped to make my readers *feel* this marginalisation, and outline its workings in a less didactic way than a non-fictional piece – especially important as I did not want to be polemical, wanting to recognise the positive achievements of the movement even as I explored its unconscious or unspoken biases.

With *Never Going Underground*, I had for the first time the advantage of being able to interview people present in the scene/movement I was documenting and could bring my

lived experience into the questions I asked them during my research. I spoke to several people, including Mancunian poet Louise Wallwein (who was on the protest's organising committee as a 17-year-old) and Hugh Fell, the 'chairman of the North West Council for Lesbian & Gay Equality' referenced in the story.¹¹⁸ They told me about the discussions about whether the campaign should support Viraj Mendes, the 'asylum seeker in Hulme, whom the government planned to deport'¹¹⁹, who had largely been left out of articles reminiscing about the march. Having been involved in various activist movements throughout my life – single-issue trans campaigns, LGBT organisations, anti-fascist and socialist groups – I applied my own extensive experience of arguments about the limits of respectability politics and solidarity to Johnny, who supported the Lesbians & Gays Support the Miners campaign in 1985 but decides here that 'More people will back us if [*the march*] is just about the Clause'.¹²⁰

These conversations also led me to discover that a crucial flashpoint in the committee meetings about the march was the question over whether singers Andy Bell (from Erasure) and Jimmy Somerville (Bronski Beat/The Communards) should perform in drag at the protest after-party. This issue brings the gay men's and the lesbians' reluctance (or antipathy) towards including 'transsexual' people to the fore: the chair explains that 'Some on the Committee feel this could confuse the issues around sexuality, and these sort of drag shows are demeaning to women.'¹²¹ When Marina says 'We respected the women's opinion' on a controversial advert that they vote to remove from the campaign literature, 'and we should respect the transsexuals' opinion on this', a man replies: 'There *aren't* any bloody transsexuals [*here*]!' ¹²² When Johnny says they have to respect the vote, which demands that Bell and Somerville don't perform in drag, Marina feels unable to join the march with much enthusiasm, or remain part of the student Gay & Lesbian Society who brought her into organising. She meets Philippa from the 'TV/TS Support Centre', who thanks her for speaking up: this takes her into a more marginal and less glamorous (or radical) form of community activism. The ending is bittersweet: Marina explains to the young barmaid at Manhattan's that the Clause, 'introduced to silence and separate us ... brought us all together', and ultimately changes her life as the group helps her find the courage and support needed to transition – no more is she reliant on finding queer and trans underside(s) to pop culture for self-validation, as she was in the late 1980s.¹²³ Then she heads back to Bristol, her adopted hometown, alone, unable to access

the happiness and stability that advances in gay rights and acceptance have brought Johnny and his partner, Stuart.¹²⁴

With the publication of *Never Going Underground* and *Tiny Pieces of Skull*, I hope that gaps in the documentation of trans lives in the 1970s and 1980s are being filled. Kaveney's novel and my story do not just say *We were here*, suggesting that there were many trans lives that did not get rewarded with a memoir. They also suggest, following Stone's clarion call, that other types of writing *were* always possible, and will continue to become more prevalent; and that the use of different modes allows for a more honest discussion of trans experiences. Throughout the 1990s, writers experimented with structure and genre, often creating hybrid forms in pursuit of Bornstein's 'transgendered writing style'.¹²⁵ They also became increasingly suspicious of directly autobiographical writing, and particularly about its relationship to the marketplace in a world that continued to fetishise and sensationalise trans people, and consider them as weird, isolated individuals rather than as a community with shared social concerns. This suspicion forms the basis of my next story.

'The Twist'

FADE IN:

SCENE 1. INT. ROBERT'S OFFICE - DAY

Robert is sitting at his desk. The room is messy - papers, film magazines and VHS tapes piled up, mugs left uncleaned. There are two posters, framed - Hitchcock's 'Psycho' and 'Peeping Tom' by Michael Powell.

Next to him is Emily. She looks nervous, in contrast to Robert's clear self-assurance. Interviewing them both is 23-year-old journalist, Sarah.

SARAH

Robert - why did you decide to make a film about a transsexual?

ROBERT

My last film focused on men - too much, your colleague said - so I decided my next would be about femininity and femaleness. I wanted to make something more "now" than 'Love on the Dole' or 'The Spire', and after I saw 'The Crying Game', I realised that transsexuals are the most important people of the Nineties - as we leave the 20th century behind, we're leaving 'male' and 'female' behind. But some things are timeless, and I'm trying to focus on love and sex from a transsexual point of view.

SARAH

So, you're making a "women's film"?

ROBERT

If it's good enough for Scorsese ...

SARAH

Did you have any female inspirations?

ROBERT

I read several transsexual memoirs - Jan Morris, April Ashley, Christine Jorgensen - but the one that struck me was 'A Different Kind of Girl' by Juliana Starr. She was an erotic dancer and prostitute who became the mistress - allegedly - of a married Tory MP, before she died of AIDS. It's pretty trashy and probably not all true, but it's a good starting point.

SARAH

It's not well-known, and its publisher, Barbarella, ceased to exist soon after its release. How did you come across it?

ROBERT

It caught my eye in a second-hand bookshop in Soho, while I was looking for something else. A lucky find, I'd say.

SARAH

Right. Emily - why did you take the part?

EMILY

I couldn't turn down the chance to work with such a respected director. Once Robert told me about Juliana's story and

sent his outline, I was sold - I couldn't have asked for a more challenging role.

SARAH

What does this 'challenge' involve?

EMILY

Well, I-

ROBERT

Besides the usual difficulties of being transsexual - repulsed lovers, family and friends disowning her, losing jobs, all that - it'll be tough, physically. She'll need a wig and heavy make-up, and something extra for the sex scenes. We've got our technicians on that.

SARAH

I see. Not everyone wanted to do this, did they? Ruth McAndrew said that she "wasn't prepared to be a woman pretending to be a man pretending to be a woman" and likened it to Julie Andrews in 'Victor/Victoria'. Emily - do you feel playing this role undermines your womanhood?

EMILY

No, I'm not my character. I read a lot and saw just how difficult these people's lives are - often harder than real women.

SARAH

Don't you think transsexuals benefit from

male privilege?

EMILY

Maybe some do. But not Juliana - she's a total outsider.

SARAH

Emily - can you talk about being cast opposite your fiancé?

EMILY

We're both very excited. It'll be totally different to when viewers last saw us together, in 'Passchendaele'.

ROBERT

It'll definitely give things more spice.

EMILY

We'd better get on. Lovely meeting you.

Emily stands and offers to shake Sarah's hand. Sarah is more interested in checking her Dictaphone.

SARAH

Yes, you too. I'll let you know when the piece is out - it should be in the next issue. Good luck with the film.

Sarah takes her bag and exits. Emily sighs and glances at Robert, who glares at the door. Emily leaves, wordlessly.

FADE OUT:

FADE IN:

SCENE 2. INT. FILM STUDIO - DAY

Emily, Robert and Christian are on the set - a Soho bedsit, curtains closed, just the bedside lamp for light. There is a newspaper on the bed; its triumphant headline refers to the end of the miners' strike.

Emily wears a brown bob wig with highlights, false eyelashes and glossy lips and a low-cut top. Christian, in a grey suit and tie, watches as the Make-Up Artist unbuttons Emily's jeans, pulls down her pants and fits a prosthetic penis just below her waist.

ROBERT

Stay there - I want to see how that looks. (He goes behind the camera) Hmm ... a little more light, please.

The Assistant Director shifts the reflector.

EMILY

It's so uncomfortable.

ROBERT

What is?

EMILY

All of it, but especially this. (She pulls up her jeans) Why make me wear it all the time, just to keep strapping it down?

ROBERT

So you can see what it's like to carry it

around. (Beat) Right, this is *big* - I want to see your nerves. You think he knows, but you don't *know* if he knows. You're about to find out, and it's terrifying.

CHRISTIAN

Come on, there's no way he doesn't know. Isn't the issue that he can't accept it?

ROBERT

The script says he isn't sure because the book says he wasn't sure. Perhaps he's been blinded by his libido. Sorry guys, I know it's hard, but it'll be worth it.

Emily and Christian look at each other, apprehensive.

Right, let's try it. Sound?

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR

Sound rolling.

ROBERT

And ... action!

Emily and Christian look into each other's eyes for a moment, and then kiss. Christian grabs her breasts - she kisses him more intensely. Then he starts undoing her jeans. She tries to hold him off: he keeps going, and pulls them down, along with her pants. Then he sees her genitalia and stops, stunned.

EMILY

I thought you knew ...

CHRISTIAN

You bloody ... bastard! Why didn't you say?

EMILY

You didn't ask!

Christian slaps Emily and shoves her onto the bed. She gets up and swings at him, missing. He punches her. She recoils, and then grabs a pillow and hits him with it.

ROBERT

Cut! Emily, this is great, but when he attacks you, don't fight back so hard. Juliana is a masochist, remember.

EMILY

Yes, but she's not a wimp.

ROBERT

No, but she's not a prize fighter either.

EMILY

Sorry - I'm struggling with how passive Juliana is, a lot of the time. Do you actually *know* any transsexuals?

ROBERT

Being faithful to the text isn't enough?

EMILY

I'm not sure it is, actually.

ROBERT

My researcher is on it. They don't like

coming forward.

Emily takes off the prosthetic penis and throws it to the floor. As the Assistant Director picks it up, panicked, she pulls up her jeans, gets her coat and bag, and walks out. Robert takes a huge mobile phone from his Assistant and tries to call her. Christian stops him.

CHRISTIAN

I'll talk to her. It'll be alright.

ROBERT

It'd better be.

FADE OUT:

FADE IN:

SCENE 3. INT. CAFE - DAY

Emily enters a café, near her home in Notting Hill. She annotates Juliana's memoir, looking at people as they come in. Kara enters, wearing black trousers, a pastel-pink blouse and sunglasses. People glance at her.

EMILY

You must be Kara. (Offers her hand) I'm so happy to meet you.

KARA

It's an honour. I loved 'North and South'.

EMILY

Thanks so much for sparing the time. You were the only person who got back to me.

KARA

Always happy to help. But tell me - how are you approaching people?

EMILY

I put an advert in the Gay Times, and I wrote to the Beaumont Society ...

Kara puts her head in her hand, half-smiling.

I also asked the Gender Clinic at Charing Cross if I could put something up there ...

KARA

Darling - the Gay Times is for homosexual

men. Do I look like a homosexual man?

Emily shakes her head.

And the Beaumont Society is for married cross-dressers - and their wives. Not gay transvestites, and definitely not us. The only one that might work is the clinic, but it's full of people who've talked enough about their 'journeys' as it is.

EMILY

I get that, but people bit my head off! Someone even said I was only doing this because it's "trendy" ... (Kara turns her head.) I want to help!

KARA

I'm grateful. Even if no-one else is.

EMILY

What does that mean?

KARA

I'm sorry, I'm sure you want to help. You just don't know the right places. Have you got 'The Transvestite's Guide to London'?

EMILY

I'm not looking for transvestites.

KARA

Ah - you *have* done your homework! It's for transsexuals as well - we need to

know where to buy clothes and shoes too.
It lists a few venues - they're mostly
for drag queens and cross-dressers but
even if you don't find people, you'll
find people who'll find people.

The camera pulls back, showing Kara and Emily talking,
through the window. Emily waves away the waitress: we
see her and Kara laughing together as the scene ends.

FADE OUT:

FADE IN:

SCENE 4. INT. EMILY AND CHRISTIAN'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Emily is dressing up - gold dress, fishnet tights, stilettos. Glittery eyeshadow, false lashes. 'The Transvestite's Guide to London' is on her desk. As she agonises over her lipstick, Christian gets home.

EMILY

Hi honey - how was your day?

CHRISTIAN

(OOV) Alright. The toothpaste ad only took an hour. Did you call Robert?

EMILY

Yes, it's cool. He's revising the script.
Christian enters and looks at Emily. He laughs.

CHRISTIAN

Where are you off to?

EMILY

(Checking her make-up) Bar Fabulous.

CHRISTIAN

What's that?

EMILY

Tranny club.

CHRISTIAN

Are you going in character?

EMILY

Yes, I want to see what it's like. (Beat)
Are the eyelashes too much?

Christian hesitates.

I feel really ...

CHRISTIAN

'Inauthentic'? Here.

Christian hands Emily the wig, which was lying on the bed. She puts on a hairnet and then the wig, moving it obsessively. Christian shifts it into place and smiles.

I'd kiss you, but I'd ruin your lips.

Emily grabs Christian and kisses him.

Do you want me to come with you?

EMILY

Juliana would have gone alone.

CHRISTIAN

Okay ... Keep safe, won't you?

EMILY

It'll be fine. I think I pass.

CHRISTIAN

Sure, but take a taxi. Please.

Christian gives Emily a £20 note.

EMILY

Thanks.

She pecks his cheek, gets a cardigan and turns to leave.

CHRISTIAN

Just out of interest - what did you put
down your ...

Emily nods at the wardrobe. Christian sees that his sock
drawer is open. Emily winks, laughs and exits.

FADE OUT:

FADE IN:

SCENE 5. EXT/INT. BAR FABULOUS - NIGHT

Emily leaves the taxi. A drag queen is on the door.

DRAG QUEEN

Evening, darling. You look fabulous.

EMILY

Thanks.

Emily smiles and steps inside. There are cross-dressers behind the bar, and trans women sitting at tables, or on the dancefloor. She sees framed pictures of Hollywood heroines (Marilyn, Dietrich and others), a DJ booth with a drag queen inside, and a stage with a lamé backdrop.

She joins the queue at the bar.

1ST MAN

Hey - can I buy you a drink?

EMILY

No, I'm fine. Thanks.

She catches the barmaid's attention.

Dark rum and coke, please.

She gets out her purse.

1ST MAN

Go on - let me get it.

EMILY

Honestly, it's alright.

1ST MAN

Can I just say - you're the most gorgeous girl I've ever seen. So convincing.

Emily goes to the dance floor. They're playing 'Saturday Night' by Whigfield. Some trans women are dancing around their handbags, slowly. There are men, watching.

A trans woman smiles at Emily, inviting her to join the group. She puts down her bag and tries to relax.

ZELDA

You look familiar. Have we met before?

EMILY

I don't think so.

ZELDA

Anyway, I'm Zelda.

EMILY

Tilda.

ZELDA

After Swinton?

EMILY

Haha ... yeah. Wait, are you Zelda from the mem-

1ST MAN

Mind if I join you?

ZELDA

Sure.

Emily tries to continue dancing. The 1st Man edges closer and puts his hand up her skirt.

1ST MAN

Oh, you're post-op?

Emily slaps him, hard. Everyone stops: the 1st Man rushes for the exit.

ZELDA

Hon, are you okay?

EMILY

I'll be alright.

Zelda takes Emily's hand and leads her towards the toilets. They queue - people are doing their make-up.

ZELDA

Darling, you been to a tranny club before?

EMILY

No, this is my first time.

ZELDA

Your voice is amazing! Who's your coach?

EMILY

What? This is my real voice.

ZELDA

Oh my God, seriously? You're so lucky.
And such nice cheekbones, too.

Emily blushes and laughs. Another man interjects.

2ND MAN

And such kissable lips! How about it
babe?

EMILY

How about you fuck off?

2ND MAN

Alright, I was only asking.

He walks off.

ZELDA

Tilda - you're not a tranny, are you?

Emily hesitates, looks around and shakes her head.

So what made you come here?

EMILY

I was curious.

ZELDA

Sweetheart - chasers are 'curious'.

You're not a chaser. So why did you come?

EMILY

Can you keep a secret?

ZELDA

Always.

EMILY

I'm an actress.

ZELDA

I knew it! I read that interview where you said playing Juliana was a "challenge".

EMILY

I meant that I knew things were hard ...

ZELDA

How did you get here tonight?

EMILY

I got a cab.

ZELDA

So you've got no idea what it's like when we have to get a bus, let alone walk the streets. You've got no idea what it's like when we try to get a job, or even go to the bathroom. You've got no idea what it's like when your mum slams the phone down on you and you know that you can never call again, or when your boyfriend pulls a knife on you because he found what you were "hiding", even though you were hiding because you knew it would happen if-

EMILY

I know it's hard, I spoke to people. The film deals with sex.

ZELDA

Another tragic tranny gets raped and beaten by some john, eh?

EMILY

No, it's not like that.

ZELDA

You were going to ask if I was the Zelda from Juliana's book, weren't you?

EMILY

Well, I-

ZELDA

Your director may be a wanker, but he's right when he says that her book is bollocks. (Beat) She couldn't get her surgery on the NHS because of her drug habit so she needed some money to go private, but none of the big publishers bought it and nor did the tabloids. Then she found out she had AIDS and thought she'd just scandalise as many people as possible before she died.

EMILY

Oh my God ...

ZELDA

And I'm sure you know, but we don't all dress like that.

EMILY

Look, I want to talk more - here's my
number, get in touch. I'll leave you
alone now. It won't be another
exploitation film, I promise.

Zelda watches Emily leave. She shakes her head, sighs
and heads back to the dancefloor.

FADE OUT:

FADE IN:

SCENE 6. INT. ZELDA'S FLAT, DALSTON - EVENING

Zelda's studio flat, with a small kitchen and rickety old oven, and little fridge/freezer. There is a pan full of vegetables on the hob. The living space is a mess: books, magazines, papers and videotapes everywhere. Zelda is tidying up. There is a knock on the door - Zelda opens it to Emily and they hug.

ZELDA

Hey! Did you find it okay?

EMILY

I got a cab from Notting Hill. Thanks for taking the time, I know you're busy.

ZELDA

No problem, I wanted to talk to you.

EMILY

The food smells nice, what is it?

ZELDA

Vegetarian lasagna. One of the few good things I got from the Hackney squats. They didn't teach me to be tidy, obviously.

EMILY

It's fine ... (She looks at Zelda's videos)
Jarman, Almodóvar - I love all that.

Emily grabs a tape, 'The Death of Maria Malibran', intrigued, and then sees Zelda's 16mm Bolex camera.

Do you make films?

ZELDA

Sometimes. Just a few shorts so far.

Emily picks up a magazine.

EMILY

Oh - you've kept our interview ...

ZELDA

Yeah. (Beat) I don't know what Juliana would've made of it.

EMILY

You must have some idea.

ZELDA

She didn't call herself an 'outsider', I know that. She got pretty sick of being treated like one.

EMILY

By the politicians?

Zelda laughs.

What?

ZELDA

Darling - I promised you the real story

of Juliana Starr, didn't I?

EMILY

Yes ...

A flashback starts. Zelda is sat alone at a table at Heaven, the London gay club. 'Relax' by Frankie Goes To Hollywood is playing. Juliana, dressed in a black mesh top, pink PVC miniskirt and jacket, fishnet stockings and boots, comes over, holding a cigarette.

JULIANA

Hey babe - got a light?

Zelda gets a lighter from her bag. They smoke and talk, watching the dancefloor - there are no other women, trans or otherwise. Juliana looks at her face in a pocket mirror: she can see some five o'clock shadow. She sighs, and covers it with foundation, as Zelda gives her a reassuring rub on the shoulder.

Then there is a montage of scenes, sound-tracked by Soft Cell: Zelda and Juliana at house parties, hanging out at art galleries, taking drugs in squats. We see Zelda on the phone in a dimly lit room, talking in her sexiest voice, and Juliana talking to a cab driver on a Soho street corner. Finally, we see them kissing and going to bed together in Juliana's bedsit.

ZELDA (V/O)

She was the first transsexual I ever really got to know. We didn't like the gay clubs that much, and once we found each other, we hung out elsewhere -

squats and communes, galleries, dive bars, anywhere that would have us. Gradually, we ended up together - we didn't really talk about it. We just got each other.

Zelda is in their shared flat, watching a video. Juliana enters, ashen-faced, and goes to the bedroom.

ZELDA

Darling, what's up? (No answer.) Babe, I know that look. Come on.

JULIANA

I got tested.

ZELDA

Tested? For what? (Realises) Oh Jesus, you're ... Why didn't you use protection?

JULIANA

(Starts crying) I don't think it's that.

ZELDA

I thought you were clean! Who sold it to you?

JULIANA

Zelda, calm down-

ZELDA

If I find out who fixed you, I'll break their fucking neck- Was it in a squat?

JULIANA

It was with a client.

ZELDA

Fucking hell, Juliana ... (She sits, taking deep breaths) What are we gonna do?

JULIANA

I don't know.

Juliana falls onto Zelda's shoulder and weeps.

I still had so much I wanted to do ...

ZELDA (V/O)

So you see - it wasn't so glamorous.

ZELDA

Why don't you write a memoir?

JULIANA

But my life's been so boring ...

ZELDA

People always say that. Besides, we can spice it up a bit.

We see Juliana's bedsit in the mid-1980s, looking similar but not identical to Robert's version in the mid-1990s. Rather than a tabloid newspaper, there are posters - Laurie Anderson and Jayne County.

JULIANA

I thought you knew ...

TORY MP

You bloody ... bastard! Why didn't you say?

JULIANA

You didn't ask!

As the Tory MP slaps Juliana and shoves her onto the bed, Zelda starts talking.

ZELDA (V/O)

None of that ever happened.

We return to Zelda's flat. She talks over dinner. Emily looks at her, stunned.

ZELDA

We made it all up. Partly 'cos we hated the fucking Tories so much, given how gleeful they were that our friends all dropped dead. But mainly 'cos we thought the tabloids would bite our hands off.

EMILY

What happened?

ZELDA

Nobody wanted it - they didn't trust a tranny. Rightly, I guess. Anyway - it's small fry compared to Mellor, Milligan, perhaps they knew what was coming.

EMILY

Jesus ...

ZELDA

Juliana died a week after she finished the manuscript. We'd hoped that we might raise something for her funeral, but too late. At least we got it out. Even if she didn't make a penny. And it's full of shit.

EMILY

Well, now you can set the record straight.

ZELDA

Nah, film people are even worse. They'll want all that scandal.

EMILY

Not everyone will.

ZELDA

Your director does. (Beat) What's he like?

EMILY

Well, he's got his faults (Zelda looks at

her.) He is kind of creepy, but he's smart and talented, I think we can get through to him. Together. Look, I know you're not sure, but the film is going to happen-

ZELDA

Just because a book has been optioned - if it has - doesn't mean a movie is definitely going to happen. And who got the money for it, anyway?

EMILY

I'll introduce you to Robert and you can ask. The production is well underway, I don't think you can-

ZELDA

Christ.

EMILY

I don't know how you can be involved, but think: it could get you off the dole, it could get you out of this flat, it could get you the facial surgery, it could even get you making films. (Zelda hesitates) Just come to the set. I'll look after you.

ZELDA

Alright. Let's see how it goes.

Emily gets up and approaches Zelda. They hug.

FADE OUT:

FADE IN:

SCENE 7. INT. FILM STUDIO - DAY

Robert is talking to the Researcher as the Runner decorates the set - Juliana's bedsit. Emily enters, dramatically, with Zelda.

ROBERT

The prodigal child!

EMILY

What? You knew I was coming back.

Robert hugs Emily, for a little too long. She looks uncomfortable. Robert looks at Zelda.

ROBERT

And you brought a friend?

EMILY

Yes, this is Zelda. She's going to help.

ROBERT

Help?

EMILY

Looking at the script, making it more acc-

ROBERT

I told you I had my researcher on this.

EMILY

This is Zelda. From the memoir!

Robert turns to the Researcher, and glares at him. The Researcher leaves, humiliated.

ZELDA

I'd be more worried about the book you're filming if I were you. It's bollocks.

ROBERT

Oh yeah?

ZELDA

I co-wrote it. So yeah.

ROBERT

Why did you write a "bollocks" book then?

ZELDA

We were skint.

ROBERT

You gave an audience what it wanted.

EMILY

Is that the most important thing?

ROBERT

Wait - did no-one tell you?

EMILY

Tell me what?

Christian enters, dressed as Juliana. Emily looks at him in horror; Zelda rolls her eyes.

CHRISTIAN

I thought you were telling her!

EMILY

Telling me what?

ROBERT

Alright Christina, keep your hair on!

(Beat) I thought it'd make more sense if a man played the transsexual.

EMILY

It's my part!

ROBERT

You could play the wife.

EMILY

Juliana didn't have a wife!

ZELDA

Unless you mean me.

ROBERT

It's okay to take a bit more license. I might try a film about a man who breaks out of his boring life to walk on the wild side. It would still be your film - you'd be trying to get him back. And you wouldn't have to wear the dick.

EMILY

The boring wife. (To Christian) And you went along with this?

CHRISTIAN

He just said to see what it looked like.

EMILY

Couldn't you play Zelda?

ZELDA

Couldn't *I* play Zelda?

ROBERT

You're too old to play Zelda! (Beat) I'm not sure we'll need her now, anyway.

ZELDA

Well, you can't have him as Juliana. She never would have worn that girly-girl top, and what the fuck is that posture?

ROBERT

I just said you aren't needed.

Robert flicks his hand at the exit. Zelda stays.

EMILY

(To Christian) You are not doing this.

ROBERT

Then stick to the script.

ZELDA

But it's all lies!

ROBERT

Your lies!

EMILY

Why not fix them?

ROBERT

It's a feature, not a documentary.

Emily glares at Christian. He gives her a 'not my fault' gesture. She glances at Robert and leaves; Zelda follows. Robert throws his clipboard to the floor, nearly hitting Christian.

ROBERT

Can we have one fucking shoot that doesn't end with her storming out? (To Christian) Don't answer that, sweetheart. Alright, everyone fuck off.

Robert exits. Christian stands alone for a moment, rips off his wig and goes back to the make-up room.

FADE OUT:

FADE IN:

SCENE 8. INT. EMILY AND CHRISTIAN'S HOUSE - DAY

Emily gets home and slams the door. She hangs up her jacket and goes to the bedroom. She flings herself onto the bed. We hear gentle footsteps on the stairs. Christian stands in the doorway.

CHRISTIAN

Hi. (Emily ignores him.) I tried to call.

EMILY

Why didn't you follow me?

CHRISTIAN

In those clothes? (Emily closes her eyes.) Robert walked off. I got changed and came back. Where were you?

EMILY

I took Zelda for lunch. To apologise.

Christian nods.

You're really in with that fucking creep, aren't you?

CHRISTIAN

Look, he only said I might try playing a transsexual in one scene. I didn't know who until they'd done my costume.

EMILY

"Didn't you tell her?"

CHRISTIAN

He was just covering himself. I'd never do that to you, you know that.

Silence. Christian sits on the bed. Emily makes just a little room for him.

CHRISTIAN

What'll we do?

EMILY

I don't know.

CHRISTIAN

Maybe we should stick with what we had.

EMILY

Sure, I'll give in.

CHRISTIAN

Let's meet him. Me and you.

EMILY

And Zelda.

CHRISTIAN

The main thing is that I'll back you. If you're not the star, I won't be either.

EMILY

The film needs to be honest. That's bigger than you, and it's bigger than me.

CHRISTIAN

Than us. I understand. But let's not throw everything away. Please. I love you.

EMILY

I love you too.

They kiss.

I don't know how you'll feel about this, but ... you looked hot as a woman.

(Christian laughs.) You wanna try it? (He laughs again.) Come on.

Christian undresses. Emily puts him in a bra, knickers and a dress, does his make-up and then fits the wig on him. They kiss, passionately.

FADE OUT:

FADE IN:

SCENE 9. EXT/INT. ROBERT'S OFFICE - DAY

Emily, Christian and Zelda are standing outside Robert's office, on a street in Soho. Robert turns up late.

CHRISTIAN

Hi.

ROBERT

Hello.

He opens the door and lets them in first. He takes his seat behind the desk.

I've only got three chairs.

ZELDA

I'll stand.

ROBERT

Very well. (To Emily) What did you decide?

CHRISTIAN

I'm not taking her part.

ROBERT

So you're sticking to the script?

EMILY

We had another idea.

ROBERT

Oh yeah?

ZELDA

We make a movie about why Juliana and I wrote the book we did. About life on the dole and the game, about transsexual clubs and parties, about how to survive Thatcher and AIDS. About how hard it is to love in a world that hates you.

ROBERT

It's fascinating. But nobody's buying all that doom and gloom any more.

CHRISTIAN

With Em and me as transsexual lovers?

ROBERT

Take it to Almodóvar.

ZELDA

We want you to do it.

ROBERT

I'm an auteur.

EMILY

Auteurs don't always write their own scripts.

ROBERT

I do.

ZELDA

Do you want to make art, or money?

ROBERT

They're not mutually exclusive.

ZELDA

They are for you, it seems.

Zelda walks out. Emily gets up.

ROBERT

Emily, I've had enough. You signed a deal.

Emily leaves, and Christian follows. Robert lights a cigarette and stares out of the window.

FADE OUT:

FADE IN:

SCENE 10. EXT/INT. EMILY AND CHRISTIAN'S HOUSE - DAY

Zelda rings the bell, and looks bemused when she hears the tune - 'Ode to Joy'. Emily opens the door and hugs her. Zelda sees the family photos and twee ornaments in the hallway, and then Christian on the sofa. Zelda sits on the armchair and takes a manuscript from her bag.

ZELDA

So, I worked on this.

CHRISTIAN

You've got a script? Already?

ZELDA

It's just a scenario. We can work it up.

CHRISTIAN

"Work it up"?

ZELDA

Yeah - improvise certain scenes, and work on the dialogue together.

EMILY

What's the plot?

ZELDA

I told you - Jules and I get together, she gets ill, we do the book, but it doesn't sell. We can build your bit, Christian, with a twist - the memoir gets optioned for a film, and so you have a

dilemma.

EMILY

But it's still my film?

ZELDA

Our film. So - you up for it?

CHRISTIAN

How's it going to work?

EMILY

What do you mean?

CHRISTIAN

Well - who's paying for it?

ZELDA

It won't cost much, but I'll need your help - finding a crew, and some funding. But I'll shoot on VHS. It looks beautiful, and it'll fit the Eighties vibe.

CHRISTIAN

And you'll direct?

ZELDA

Yeah.

CHRISTIAN

Look ... I don't know.

EMILY

Let's try a few scenes. (Beat) You did for Robert.

ZELDA

I need both of you if it's going to sell.

CHRISTIAN

Where will we shoot?

ZELDA

We'll make a calling card scene at my place. It's where Juliana lived, so it's already one up on Robert.

CHRISTIAN

And what about Robert?

EMILY

I can't work with him.

CHRISTIAN

You might have to, darling.

EMILY

If he likes what we do, maybe we can work something out.

CHRISTIAN

I doubt it. But ... let's see.

Zelda hugs Christian. He lets her go and kisses Emily.

FADE OUT:

FADE IN:

SCENE 11. INT. ZELDA'S FLAT - DAY

Emily is dressed as Juliana, and Christian as Zelda. The actual Zelda is directing, holding a VHS camera.

ZELDA

Right, here I'm apologising to Juliana for blaming her for getting ill. She doesn't reply so I suggest the book.

EMILY

Is that how it was?

ZELDA

Close enough. (Christian raises his eyebrows.) Okay, go on the bed ...

Emily and Christian sit. Zelda moves with the camera.

I'll have to shoot from the bathroom, it's the only way I'll get the right distance.

EMILY

How will you cut it?

ZELDA

We'll do it from a few angles. I might try some double exposures too.

CHRISTIAN

Good luck getting people to fund it with tricks like *that*.

ZELDA

We'll do a straight-up love scene,
that'll reel them in. Well, maybe not
'straight'.

EMILY

What do we do?

ZELDA

Just kiss. Then heat it up.

Emily and Christian kiss. They caress each other, and
Emily starts to remove Christian's top.

ZELDA

Okay - guys, this is great, but
Christian, you need to lead.

CHRISTIAN

You were the domme?

ZELDA

(Moves towards Christian) I'll show you.

CHRISTIAN

No, it's fine, I get it.

ZELDA

Go on then.

Christian kisses Emily, and then gets her into bed. He
puts his hand down her top and touches her chest.

ZELDA

Cut!

Zelda puts one hand on Christian's head, the other on his bust. Christian responds, vigorously.

EMILY

Do you want my part?

ZELDA

I'm just showing him what to do.

EMILY

'Just showing him'?

CHRISTIAN

Sorry.

Zelda goes to the toilet. Emily glares at Christian.

I just like the clothes, that's all.

(Beat) Please don't tell anyone.

EMILY

Why didn't you tell me?

CHRISTIAN

I thought you'd leave ... I worried you'd tell people ...

EMILY

Darling, I'd never sell you out like that.

Zelda returns.

ZELDA

Let's try it again. On film - tape - I think you've got it.

Christian kisses Emily, and then gets her into bed. He puts his hand down her top and touches her chest.

Wonderful! Let's try again from over here.

Zelda moves in. Christian and Emily repeat the scene.

Cut! That's even better.

EMILY

It feels great.

CHRISTIAN

Shall we go on, or take it back to Robert?

EMILY

Let's decide when we've got a few scenes.

ZELDA

That's enough for today, anyway. We'll get back together on Friday.

Christian goes to the toilet.

Do you need help getting your make-up off?

EMILY

He can manage. Trust me. (Whispers) Look,

I know we're doing an amateur film now,
but can you keep it professional?

ZELDA

Sorry ... I didn't think it'd be this
weird.

EMILY

Do you fancy him? When he's you, I mean?

ZELDA

It's just ... you seem so happy together ...

EMILY

You're trying to break us up?

ZELDA

No, of course not! It's so hard not to
think about how life could've been ...

EMILY

Normal?

ZELDA

Better ...

Zelda starts crying. Emily sits her on the sofa and
puts her arm around her. Christian comes back and nods
at Zelda; Emily gestures to say, 'She'll be fine'.

FADE OUT:

FADE IN:

SCENE 12. INT. ROBERT'S OFFICE - DAY

Robert is at his desk, with Christian, Emily and Zelda. There is a VCR and TV on a trolley in a corner - Zelda holds a videotape.

ROBERT

Right, what have you got?

EMILY

We'll show you.

Zelda plays the tape. The scene plays out. It's tinted blue rather than in colour, with various double exposures laying scenes from Zelda's past over Juliana telling Zelda about her HIV test and the reconciliation. Ambient music plays over the make-up sex. Robert looks sceptical during the HIV scenes and bored when archive footage of trans women at a Pride march appears, but excited about the sex scenes. Zelda and Emily notice him smiling, and exchange a small grin.

ROBERT

It's interesting. How are you funding it?

CHRISTIAN

We're struggling.

ROBERT

I'll bet. Nobody wants this sub-Warhol shit. Let alone all this prattle about class. It might be set ten years ago but it's not the bloody Eighties now, is it?

CHRISTIAN

I have to say - I don't like the flag-waving either.

EMILY

It doesn't *look* like an Eighties film.

ROBERT

You weren't at film school then, were you? Count yourself lucky: I had to sit through some absolute shite. (To Zelda) You know the rights to this book went into the public domain, don't you?

Christian and Emily turn to Zelda.

She hasn't signed anything.

ZELDA

We couldn't marry, even if we want to - obviously - and Juliana's family disowned her. We didn't expect much so I told the publisher to donate any royalties to the Terrence Higgins Trust and to reserve the rights. But we'd be making a film *about* the book, not *of* it.

ROBERT

I can see what my legal team make of that. 'Plagiarism', maybe. (To Emily and Christian) Either way, you two signed up with me. So, what'll it be?

EMILY

I've had enough.

ROBERT

You're not the only one. Christian?

(Beat) If you do this film, my way, then
I'll let Emily out of her contract. Final
offer.

Emily looks at Christian. Zelda gets her tape and exits,
holding back tears. Emily takes Christian's hand and
stares into his eyes, not seeing Robert glare at them.

FADE OUT:

FADE IN:

SCENE 13. INT. VARIOUS LOCATIONS - DAY

Robert is at his desk, reading a letter.

CHRISTIAN (V/O)

Dear Robert,

I am writing to apologise, and because I think it is best that we have everything on paper. I am afraid that I cannot continue with the film. I should have said so when we last met with Emily.

We see Emily and Christian at home. They are having a blazing row: she is screaming at him.

EMILY

A promise from you is worth fuck all!

Emily throws a cushion at Christian and storms out.

CHRISTIAN (V/O)

I am trying to persuade her not to give up on her dream, or on me. Maybe I can bring her back to acting, at least. I'm not hopeful, and - as I'm sure you understand - this has been why my performances as Juliana haven't worked.

We see Christian on set as Juliana, kissing the politician, played by another man. It's strangely lifeless, and in a close-up, we see Christian looking stilted, awkward. Angry, Robert cuts.

I know you will be unhappy with the outcome, but in the long term, I think it's best for all of us.

I hope that we can find an agreement regarding our contracts, and that you find another way to make this film.

Yours,

Christian.

Robert puts the letter in a drawer and exits.

FADE OUT:

FADE IN:

SCENE 14. EXT. CINEMA - EVENING

Caption: 'Two years later'

Robert is attending a film premiere. He looks aged: he's lost some hair and grown stubble, wearing sunglasses. Beautiful people enter the cinema as cameras flash. A Journalist thrusts a microphone towards his face.

JOURNALIST

Robert - tell us about your new film.

ROBERT

This is a passion project. I've always loved Orwell, and 'Keep the Aspidistra Flying' has been unfairly ignored. I was happy to get such good people involved, they were so easy to work with.

JOURNALIST

This is a surprise, isn't it, given that many people were expecting your transsexual film with Christian Brady and Emily Staunton? Can you tell us what's happened to that?

ROBERT

They weren't right for the script, and then I felt the time was right to do this. I might still go back to it. Thanks.

Robert shoves away the Journalist and goes inside.

FADE OUT:

FADE IN:

SCENE 15 (EPILOGUE). INT/EXT. VARIOUS LOCATIONS - DAY

The screen goes blue.

ZELDA (V/O)

'Keep the Aspidistra Flying' was critically acclaimed, but then Robert made more commercial films. You've probably seen some of them.

Clip from Robert's 'The True Story of the People's Princess' (2004), showing Diana and Dodi al-Fayed together by a swimming pool.

Christian stayed in film, but he wasn't so lucky.

Clip of Christian playing a butler, with just a little dialogue, in 'Rhodes to Freedom', a British film about Cecil Rhodes made in 2001, and already forgotten.

He came out as a cross-dresser in 2012 and got a couple of bit-parts off the back of this.

Clip of Christian playing an older transvestite in a Channel 4 drama.

Disillusioned, Emily quit acting, left London and took up teaching.

Shot of Emily teaching English in a secondary school, in what looks like a white, middle-class area. Both her and the children look bored and frustrated.

And me? Well - I've written this film. It felt like the only way to set things straight.

Shot of Zelda in the present, at her desk. She's still in the same flat, but it's cleaner and tidier.

I hope you liked it.

FADE OUT:

THE END

'The Twist': Hybrid forms, trans theory and the suspicion of memoir

During the 1990s, it became possible to speak of a trans *culture* (or *subculture*) for the first time. In North America, several writers took up Stone's call to document their experiences in a way that would break the silence mandated by GICs and a transphobic society. By the end of the decade, they had moved away from the traditional memoir and towards theoretical writing that retained autobiographical aspects but incorporated them into on histories of trans identities, activism and art, branching into theatre, literature and some interesting hybrid forms. There was also a wave of (relatively) mainstream films that addressed trans issues with (relative) sensitivity, using trans characters as protagonists in ways that few films before had, even if they did not use trans actors, as various US and European 'underground' filmmakers had done over the preceding decades. In literature and film, the question of who got to represent trans lives, and how the identities and lived experiences of who did affected the form and content of those stories, was being asked – and the question of how the marketplace shaped those stories became ever more pressing.

At the end of the decade, a new sensation appeared in American literature, which ultimately brought these issues into sharper focus. *Sarah* (2000), about a teenage hustler in rural America, born male but living mostly as a woman with other trans sex workers, impressed 'underground' authors such as Dennis Cooper and Chuck Palahniuk, and soon had many celebrity fans. Not only was it a humorous fantasy that put late-nineties 'misery memoir' tropes such as rape and childhood abuse into a register closer to *Alice in Wonderland* than *Angela's Ashes*, but its narrative was apparently drawn from the life of the writer, JT LeRoy – the 19-year-old child of a West Virginia sex worker, living with gender dysphoria and HIV.

Here, apparently, was the perfect 'marketable' author – except LeRoy was too shy to appear in public. No matter: others performed readings in his place, to devoted fans who began wearing raccoon penis bones around their necks, like the trick-turning 'lot lizards' in *Sarah*. Then, Laura Albert – the New York mother and thirty-something punk musician who had actually written *Sarah* – saw sister-in-law Savannah Knoop in sunglasses and a blonde wig and decided that Knoop could represent 'LeRoy' in public. Here, Albert

moved beyond Mary Ann Evans writing as George Eliot to survive in a sexist world, or the heteronyms that Fernando Pessoa created to write in different voices – not least because Knoop/LeRoy would participate in a live circuit that did not exist in Pessoa's time, let alone Eliot or Sand's.

So Knoop played 'LeRoy' to huge crowds, always accompanied by Cockney minder 'Speedie' (Albert). Watching them in *Author: The JT LeRoy Story* (2016), it seems incredible that this was not where it unravelled, but when 'LeRoy' became a superstar. For years, Albert/ Speedie and Knoop/LeRoy were ever-present at parties and premieres, and the constant subject of interviews – until 2006, when the *New York Times* ran Warren St. John's 'unmasking'. St. John identified Knoop as the public face, central to a 'circumstantial case that Laura Albert ... writes as JT LeRoy'. Amidst anger from those who had 'believed they were supporting not only a good and innovative and adventurous voice, but *[also]* a person', he asked: 'It is unclear what effect *[this]* will have on JT Leroy's readers, who are now faced with the question of whether they have been responding to the books published under that name, or the story behind them.'¹²⁶

After this scandal, and that around James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces* (2003), the relationship between fiction, memoir and the market seemed especially vexed. Albert's defence was that *Sarah* and *The Heart is Deceitful Above All Things* (2001), were always sold as fiction. This could not be argued for Frey's book, originally marketed as a memoir of a 23-year-old's drug and alcohol addiction, and then as semi-fiction (if not autofiction) after *The Smoking Gun* website alleged that Frey had embellished or made up 'details of his purported criminal career, jail terms, and status as ... "wanted in three states" *[and]* invented a role for himself in a train accident that *[killed]* two female students.'¹²⁷ Frey made a humiliating appearance on Oprah Winfrey's talk show, after she had championed his work, admitting that large parts of the book did not reflect his history. Consequently, Random House offered to refund anyone who felt 'defrauded' if they submitted proof of purchase and 'a sworn statement that they would not have bought the book if they knew that certain facts had been embroidered or changed.'¹²⁸

Julie Rak points out that the Frey revelations caused Winfrey to 'move from her original intervention on behalf of *[his book's]* "truthiness" to a more legalistic idea of what 'truth'

is in the public sphere', positioning publishers as *moral* arbiters of genre (hence Random House's refund).¹²⁹ However, it was not the publisher that took responsibility for the LeRoy affair, but the person behind it. Albert was charged with fraud for signing a contract with Antidote Films for an adaptation of *Sarah* as 'J. T. LeRoy'. The *New York Times* reported that the trial hinged on LeRoy's 'purpose in the world', as an 'avatar' or 'respirator' for Albert's inner life, or to enhance the value of the work.¹³⁰ The court decided on the latter: Albert was ordered to pay \$116,500 to Antidote, but even their lawyers 'admitted a grudging admiration' for Albert's talent, and ability to maintain LeRoy's persona under such scrutiny.

These affairs highlighted ways in which 'authenticity' had become a commodity, especially for aspiring writers struggling to sell their novels. It emerged that Nan Talese, Vice President of Doubleday (part of Random House) suggested to Frey that *A Million Little Pieces* be issued as memoir, rather than fiction, claiming it was 'truthful' rather than factual in describing his trauma.¹³¹ Indeed, an interviewee in *Author* suggests that one reason why publishers and readers were prepared to believe LeRoy's backstory was that "exciting new discoveries" were rare in fiction.¹³² Was this because novelists typically established themselves slowly, first building a base of enthusiastic critics before a mid-career success with a wider audience? Or was it, as Nathalie Sarraute argued forty years earlier, because writers and readers no longer believed characters were anything besides refractions of their authors, meaning it made sense to write (semi-) autobiographically – and to read their 'fiction' accordingly?¹³³ Was there an exhaustion with big-name authors who regularly released novels as their occupation, and a corresponding desire to find non-professional writers who made 'marginal experiences intelligible in a mainstream register' – where it was the real life experience being sold, rather than the writer?¹³⁴ (That often made their authors as famous as their 'literary' counterparts.)

As gender-variant identities were coalescing into a wider political movement, interaction with a market obsessed with authenticity and awash with hoaxes, and boundary-blurring autofiction, was hard for openly trans writers who were, by now, certain of their suspicion of memoir. They operated in a world where they were *expected* to write about their identities, but in which those identities were dismissed as inherently false, and their works carried extra weight: any scandal like Frey or Albert/LeRoy would be used to denigrate

their entire community, whether the author had claimed to represent that community or not. One solution for those who wanted to move beyond memoir was to use fictional techniques and the novel form, whilst retaining ambiguity about how much its content drew from the realities of cross-gender living.

Several years before these scandals, in 1993, Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues* was published by independent lesbian/feminist Firebrand Books. Firebrand took a risk with Feinberg that British publishers would not with Kaveney, and it paid off: it won a Lambda Literary Award (Small Press book) and the American Library Association Lesbian/Gay Book Award (Fiction). This was not primarily a political manifesto like her *Transgender Liberation* pamphlet (1992), which aimed to bridge historical divides by calling for "gender outlaws" including 'transvestites, transsexuals, drag queens and drag kings, cross-dressers, bull-daggers, stone butchers' and others to united against shared oppression.¹³⁵ Neither, however, did it convey a sense of striving to justify itself to outsiders like many texts after *I Changed My Sex*. Instead, it occupied a contestable space between genres, but crucially, this 'extra-text' was confined to the book's covers rather than being part of a wider marketing strategy.¹³⁶ (It should be noted, too, that this 'extra-text' did not escape the author or publisher's control in the same way as LeRoy's, in part because the book did not reach a large audience beyond its intended LGBT readership.)

The novel's front cover featured a stylised photograph of Feinberg that recalled 1980s digital portraiture, simultaneously representing and de-familiarising the author. Below was 'A Novel/ Leslie Feinberg', with 'novel' used to clarify that this *was* fiction, not memoir. The back cover opened with 'Woman or man? That's the question that rages like a storm around Jess Goldberg, clouding her life and her identity' before describing the protagonist's 'growing up differently gendered' and working class in the 1950s, coming out as a butch in the following 'prefeminist' decade, and 'deciding to pass as a man in order to survive' in the early 1970s.¹³⁷ The author's own biography was briefly summarised below a more naturalistic photo, stating that 'Leslie Feinberg came of age as a young butch in Buffalo, New York, before the Stonewall Rebellion.'¹³⁸ A disclaimer stated: 'This is a work of fiction. Any similarity between characters and people, dead or alive, is a coincidence'; it was also noted that sections had appeared in a butch-femme reader called *The Persistent Desire*.¹³⁹ The acknowledgements, however, seemed to

undermine this: ‘There were times, surrounded by bashers, when I thought I would not live long enough to explain my own life. There were moments when I feared I would not be allowed to live long enough to finish writing this book. But I have!’¹⁴⁰

In *Second Skins*, Prosser devoted an entire chapter to ‘Transgender and Trans-Genre’ in *Stone Butch Blues*. Prosser wrote that it ‘does not abandon but reconfigures the conventions of transsexual narratives’ by refusing the closure of ‘fully becoming the other sex’ despite hormone use and some surgery, as Goldberg chooses ‘an incoherently sexed body in an uneasy borderland between man and woman’.¹⁴¹ *Stone Butch Blues* subverted one of those narratives’ biggest clichés – the bodily ‘homecoming’ that follows sex reassignment surgery – as the comfort that came after Goldberg’s top surgery dissipated with the realisation that ‘passing’ as male did not feel like a route home. Through a close reading of the work and the ‘extra-text’, Prosser argues that Feinberg’s evasion of these tropes relied upon the ambiguity over how far readers should take *Stone Butch Blues* as autobiographical.

How deliberate this was remains up for debate. Certainly, Feinberg found it liberating, as *ze* confirmed in several contradictory statements. In email correspondence with Prosser in 1996, Feinberg insisted that although *Stone Butch Blues* ‘drew on my knowledge of what industries and avenues were open’ to a trans person, the ‘emotional and situational path, transgender path choices and consciousness of [*Jess Goldberg*]’ were fiction.¹⁴² However, in an earlier interview for a FtM (female-to-male) newsletter, Feinberg said: ‘I felt, by telling it autobiographically, that I would pull back in a lot of places ... as transgendered people, that we’re always being told who we are, either physically or emotionally – strip or be stripped ... I feel we’ve each found our own boundaries of dignity which we will not go beyond; that we deserve. I really felt that by fictionalizing the story, that I would be able to tell more of the truth; be more brutally honest than I would if I were telling my own story.’¹⁴³

Prosser notes Feinberg’s distinction between ‘truth’ and ‘facts’, which (in contrast to Frey) worked because novels could use real-life events, but the opposite did not apply to memoirs. He also explained how his narrative draws parallels between the police who strip Goldberg in queer bars – as a pretext to more humiliation and assault, and a violent

act in itself – and the autobiographical pact that demands authors to ‘reveal’ themselves (or, at least, their best subjective truth) through disclosure of verifiable details. According to Philippe Lejeune’s first formulation of this pact, ‘identity between author’s and narrator-protagonist’s name is the primary requisite of autobiography’.¹⁴⁴ Feinberg’s use of even a ‘bad’ pseudonym (‘Jess’ and ‘Leslie’ are ambivalently gendered; ‘Goldberg’ resembles ‘Feinberg’, ethnically and phonemically) is enough to buy hir out.¹⁴⁵

Here, Feinberg sacrifices facts not only for truthfulness but also for a structural break with the transsexual memoir genre. The key words in Firebrand’s blurb were ‘the complexities of being a transgendered person in a *world* demanding simple explanations’.¹⁴⁶ Hir tacit aim was to offer a book more engaged with negotiation of ‘straight’ society, employers and trade union movements than many of its more directly autobiographical antecedents. The novel is less obliged towards didacticism than political manifestos, but like autobiographical writing, it can explore the relationship between theory and lived experience – and the reader’s knowledge that Feinberg developed hir gender-variant identity within queer subcultures gives *Stone Butch Blues* an extra emotional credibility.

However, it would have felt appropriative for Feinberg to invent episodes such as the one where Goldberg’s girlfriend Theresa terminates their relationship because she agrees with the (trans-exclusionary) lesbian feminist critique that butch-femme couple replicate the dynamics of heterosexual coupledness, or ones as traumatic as the schoolyard rapes if the protagonist shared hir name, as it would have taken the autofictional game with the reader into territory that was not playful. By bestowing them onto a figure separated from the author by name, Feinberg strikes a different deal: they do not need to have happened to hir, but to people *like* Goldberg. That said, Feinberg could not avoid *Stone Butch Blues* being read through the prism of hir own life. The publisher’s framing did not help (one would be surprised if ze did not have much input/influence), although contemporary readers were largely from the LGBT community, and like Prosser, appreciated the author’s reasons for its being ‘transgenre’.

Although JT LeRoy/Albert notoriously failed to consider the politics of representation around trans characters and authors, *Sarah* swerved the problems of this autobiographical pact in an inventive manner, not just by breaking the name-link between author and

protagonist (as *Sarah* is not the central character's name, but that of his/her mother), but, as Stephen Burt argued, by primarily constructing 'a fantasy about the thrills of playing with identity, and the pitfalls of worshipping 'authenticity''; Albert's 'parody' of the 'confessional' implied that 'If you believe this ... you must be so hungry for traumatic memoir that you'll read anything'.¹⁴⁷ It is notable that, unlike Feinberg, Albert was not (as far as we know from Albert's public statements about LeRoy) plugged into theoretical discourses about trans writing. Consequently, LeRoy's novels did not confront their readers with depictions of individual or collective gender-variant living that were anywhere near as sincere, authentic or traumatic as Feinberg's in *Stone Butch Blues* – and so, did not lead them to consider the idea that their society may be transphobic, let alone that they might be complicit in that transphobia.

These tensions between fiction and memoir, sincerity and 'authenticity' (the market's facsimile of sincerity, which takes the judgement of what is 'truthful' away from the author and confers it onto readers, or literary gatekeepers) that built throughout the 1990s formed a rich context for *The Twist*. Its title references *The Crying Game* (1992), a complex British film about how romantic desire and political action can clash with each other, but which was marketed (especially to US audiences, unfamiliar with the history of the Irish Republican Army, integral to its plot) as a story with a 'twist' regarding the female lead character's gender that viewers were urged not to 'reveal'. *The Crying Game* was one of many 1990s fiction films to have a prominent trans character: I wrote extensively about these, and my youthful feelings about them, in *Trans: A Memoir*, so will not reprise that here.¹⁴⁸ It is important to state, however, that none were straightforward transition narratives (and not all had their trans characters as leads, but many did), instead looking at how being trans complicated life more generally; and that none of them starred trans actors, or used openly trans scriptwriters, raising the possibility that nobody shaping those productions was giving serious thought to the ramifications of their narratives for the trans community – the question of who *narrates* might have been a formal one, but that of *who tells the story* was definitely a political issue.

The Twist looks at what might have happened if trans people had become involved with those productions, asking questions about how trans writers (and filmmakers) interacted with the marketplace; the instability of representations of gender-variant identities; and

how narratives about individual trans people can obscure more collective stories, or even harm the community. My most metatextual piece, it is written as a screenplay, intended to be shown on television in the present (2016) but set in the mid-1990s, telling the ‘true story’ of British director Robert Watt-Chambers’ attempt to adapt a memoir by trans dancer and sex worker Juliana Starr, who died of an AIDS-related illness shortly after its publication, in the hope of capitalising on this wave of trans films. The 6,000-word script documents the intersection between two ‘bad faith’ approaches to trans life narratives, informed by the ambivalence Stone and others felt about the memoir genre. It cuts between Watt-Chambers’ high-profile production and an apparently more ‘authentic’ *avant-garde* counter-film (shot cheaply on VHS) but otherwise follows the formal conventions of screenplay, and is written by one of its characters: Zelda, a failed underground filmmaker who was Juliana’s lover, and helped Juliana to fabricate episodes for the memoir to raise money, as they were struggling financially. (Zelda is *still* struggling: her screenplay is another attempt to escape penury through writing.) Zelda’s script shows her attempts to atone for their dishonesty – she gets involved with the production as it stages the book’s most lurid scenes, hoping to prevent Juliana’s narrative from doing the kind of damage that its commercial failure had averted, and that leads to its collapse as Watt-Chambers, defensive about his complicity in perpetuating transphobic tropes, doubles down and refuses to let Zelda’s criticisms influence his script.

Juliana’s book cannot be considered autofiction, however, as they took it to a publisher as a memoir, aware that billing it as ‘true’ would increase its value (or at least mean it would reach print, unlike *Tiny Pieces of Skull*), and it was sold on that basis. In this respect, it contrasts with *Dancing with the Devil*, in which Laura Miller wanted to counter the lies told by others about her (and, by implication, about transsexual people in general) and resembles the Frey affair, although Zelda cannot even blame an agent or publisher for the misattribution. The other key difference is that while the book was published, just after Juliana’s death – the inevitability of which meant that she did not worry about audiences checking its veracity – it received little attention (being a small publisher, that was not given any credibility in literary circles, and thus no reviews). That is, until Watt-Chambers optioned it, arguing that he had license to embellish even further as it was ‘trashy and probably not all true, but ... a good starting point’ for what he hoped would be a major hit.¹⁴⁹

Genre, and experimentation with it, is usually considered in formal terms, such as the manner of structuring narrative, or presenting dialogue. When critics, scholars or publishers assess established genres for their content, the focus is often on whether it falls under subdivisions of fact (e.g. travel writing or memoir) or fiction (horror, sci-fi, *etc.*) However, in *Auto/Biographical Discourses* (published in 1994, the year before *The Twist* is set), Laura Marcus asks if the discourse of subjectivity can itself be considered a genre.¹⁵⁰ This chimes with Nancy Miller's assertion that 'gender is genre'¹⁵¹ and Stone's concept of 'embodied texts' and how 'post-transsexual' people can disrupt 'structured sexualities'.¹⁵² (Not to mention the etymological link between 'gender' and 'genre', highlighted by Derrida – the words are the same in French.¹⁵³) To consider this idea of subjectivity as a genre complicates ideas about the locus of the self and the root of autobiography, replacing any inherent 'truth' with an analysis of the social conditions in which subjectivities are both formed and expressed. Coming from a trans perspective, this is especially interesting, given our ongoing struggle to be allowed to determine our own gender identities, and find a language adequate to express them, and play an important role in what Bornstein called the 'fight ... to deconstruct gender'.¹⁵⁴ Memoir may be a genre in which authors directly (and, ideally, honestly) explain the motives behind their actions, but *The Twist* looks at how misogyny, transphobia and poverty – at a time when the Labour Party, under Tony Blair, were insisting that class was no longer a significant political concern – intersect with the literary market to necessitate specific *untruths* from an author.

As Marcus notes, the rules of autobiography, and of who constitutes a 'universal' subject, have been defined by male authors – who are also the ones, like Watt-Chambers, allowed the most freedom to bend or break them; she asks which narrative and representational structures might be better for women.¹⁵⁵ Working with moving images, Zelda suggests that some 'third way' (a quintessentially mid-1990s term) might provide a better representational vehicle for people like Juliana and herself. Zelda hopes to make something that sits between those mainstream films that treat trans women as exotic or erotic objects, denying them a role in writing or playing trans characters, and the underground films represented by her possession of Werner Schroeter's *The Death of Maria Malibran* or Watt-Chambers' derisive allusion to Warhol as he rejects her *avant-*

garde work. Neither biopic nor feature, such films would avert the need to label characters with terms such as ‘transvestite’ or ‘transsexual’ (as in mainstream films, with their limited idea of trans people, especially trans woman, as a ‘genre’), and refuses such tropes as gratuitous shots of genitalia or clichéd scenes of taking hormones by getting trans actors to draw on their own lives. This would make both the films and scripts more improvisational and collaborative, in contrast to Watt-Chambers’ autocratic *auteurism*, and more ‘truthful’, even if not strictly factual.

Zelda never implies any concern that the formal, linguistic and ethical pacts suggested by Lejeune violate freedom of expression.¹⁵⁶ Rather, she aims to place her guilt about how Juliana’s fictions broke the ‘social contract’ between a writer and a ‘specific public’¹⁵⁷ into a context where trans writers have been confined to memoir, asked to ‘reveal’ personal information that can never be recovered, and judged by sceptical readers, in a world where they must often lie to survive, with the double bind of an openly expressed trans identity being dismissed as ‘inauthentic’, and ‘passing’ framed as dishonest. Implicit within both Juliana’s memoir and Zelda’s script is contempt for that ‘specific public’ whose prurience and prejudice forced them into this: maybe they *deserve* to be deceived. Indeed, Juliana’s tactic to subvert the obligation to ‘strip or be stripped’ is to purposefully *over-reveal*, not in a way that indulges voyeurism but rather one that exposes the absurdity of this overarching dynamic.

What does this purposeful – and economically motivated – creation of a ‘false’ autobiography mean for the idea (which Marcus posits as a logical conclusion of a deconstructionist approach) that the self can *only* be located through the effort of writing?¹⁵⁸ At best, one might argue that Juliana (and Zelda) created a fantasy self – one whose existence is not just marginal but also exotic, in the way that transsexual lives were portrayed in Lou Reed’s *Walk on the Wild Side*, or Rosa von Praunheim’s underground musical film *City of Lost Souls* (1983), rather than dull and draining in the way that poverty often necessitates. In writing, Juliana makes herself seem more interesting and more important; like Laura Albert, she takes the idea of a ‘marketable’ author to its absurd conclusion, but unlike Albert, she does not find a large audience, nor does she appear on talk shows or at literary events where the veracity of her text might be challenged. This means that she fails on her financial imperative, but does not do the ‘harm’ to a political

cause that other ‘fake’ accounts may have – at least until Robert Watt-Chambers finds it, and the higher stakes force Zelda’s hand. Unfortunately, it transpires that the other character’s career ambitions trump her concerns about authenticity and community representation. Watt-Chambers’ film collapses; the question of whether Zelda’s film will get made is unanswered, short-circuiting the optimistic/pessimistic dichotomy that runs throughout my collection.

Zelda’s failure to regain control over Juliana’s narrative, and her attempt to reassert that control by writing *The Twist* twenty years later, are the most explicit manifestation of my collection’s fundamental theme, about trans people’s control over their own stories (and, by extension, their own lives), the political uses of those stories, and how the genres available to them shape their written responses to a transphobic society. By homing in on that moment when trans activist-authors had realised that memoir was no longer fit for purpose in adequately describing their experiences to each other or outsiders, but before those critiques had filtered through to anyone who was not part of their (North American) circles, *The Twist* takes up Stone’s demand for post-transsexual people to mix genres, and suggests that if trans people wanted to tell stories that reflected their lives more accurately, they would have to reconsider not just the format of those stories, but the structures and industries through which they were expressed.

The wave of 1990s trans theory was a more reliable basis for future creativity than the decade’s films, or the memoirs that had preceded this theory. However, the contrasting fortunes of Kaveney and (until the unmasking) LeRoy suggested that mainstream publishing would be no better for trans people than mainstream cinema. Yet one of the most important realisations that the 1990s activist-authors made was that the internet – then in its infancy – would allow trans people to form communities in completely new ways. It would help them to discuss their experiences, with each other and outsiders, at a far quicker pace than traditional publishing allowed, and without gatekeepers. As a result, old types of writing were given new life, and different forms could emerge.

CHAPTER THREE: Towards a Third Wave of Trans Writing

By the turn of the millennium, I believe that it was possible to identify two distinct waves of writing by trans people (even if the ‘community’ has not yet theorised them as such). The first was dominated by memoir, spanning the five decades between Lili Elbe and Sandy Stone; the second, which took Stone’s work as its launchpad, was characterised by theory, and was into its stride by the late 1990s. Like his *Stone Butch Blues*, Leslie Feinberg’s *Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to Dennis Rodman* (1996) created its own hybrid form, combining personal experience with historical research and theory in support of a powerful statement: *We have always been here*. Patrick Califia took a similar approach in *Sex Changes: The Politics of Transgenderism* in 1997, while other writers produced more specific trans histories: Jay Prosser published his forensic analysis of transsexual narratives, *Second Skins*, in 1998; Joanne Meyerowitz’s *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States*, followed in 2002. Meanwhile, a strong enough body of further theoretical texts – which often incorporated autobiographical material – had been written by the likes of Kate Bornstein and Judith/Jack Halberstam that another trans writer could challenge it for being too detached from lived realities, as Viviane K. Namaste did in *Invisible Lives: The Erasure of Transsexual and Transgendered People* (2000).

Whilst several individuals, already named here, established themselves as leading lights within this second wave, there also appeared several volumes of personal essays that decentralised trans life writing by featuring multiple voices with differing backgrounds and gender identities, such as *PoMoSexuals* (1997), edited by Carol Queen and Lawrence Schimel, and Katrina Fox and Tracie O’Keefe’s *Trans-X-U-All* (1997) and *Finding the Real Me* (2003). These were followed by two volumes edited by Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore: *That’s Revolting!: Queer Strategies for Resisting Assimilation* (2004) and *Nobody Passes: Rejecting the Rules of Gender and Conformity* (2007), which questioned LGBTQI+ politics that concentrated on fitting into ‘straight’, conservative society. Individual authors continued to emerge: Julia Serano discussed her own experiences in an influential text on trans-misogyny, *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity* (2007), and excoriated unchallenged and

underacknowledged prejudices in autonomous communities in *Excluded: Making Feminist and Queer Movements More Inclusive* (2013).

That Serano felt able to make such criticism of her own ‘side’ was a sign of the community’s increased confidence. Reacting against the exclusionary politics of their predecessors, third and fourth-wave feminist movements became more trans-inclusive. By the late 2000s, plenty of autonomous queer and feminist spaces were stating that they welcomed trans people – although, as Serano pointed out, this promise often came with caveats. Whatever their flaws, such spaces felt like a necessary counter to transphobic strands of ‘radical’ feminism, which had – particularly in the UK – entrenched itself in prominent liberal (or ‘centrist’) media outlets. Despite the obvious power imbalance between their zines and blogs and well-funded, long-established newspapers, trans people had spaces where – in theory, at least – they would not have to spend so much energy on justifying themselves to outsiders. At last, they could talk seriously about a trans *community*, which now had not just a shared present, but also a heritage. During the opening years of the 21st century, scholars such as Stryker and Meyerowitz issued histories that charted trans identities from the industrial period to the present and asked what their future might hold. Stryker also collected important sexological, feminist, anthropological and political texts into the first *Transgender Studies Reader*, outlining an intellectual trajectory to complement the socio-historical one.

Stryker co-edited this with activist Stephen Whittle, only the second British person mentioned in this chapter so far (after Prosser). It is notable that when their *Reader* was published in 2006, the dominant voices in trans theory were almost exclusively North American – the ‘Queering Gender’ and ‘Selves and Identity’ parts of the *Reader*, made up of texts published since 1990, entirely so. Perhaps because the shared language and political similarities made it easy for British trans people to relate to North American theoretical texts, and the internet made it easier for British people to access them, UK activists focused less on feminist, queer or trans theory and more on nationally-specific political issues. Co-founded by Whittle and Christine Burns in 1992, Press for Change participated in the fight for an end to employment discrimination against transsexual people, the right to hormones and surgery on the National Health Service, and the passage

of the Gender Recognition Act 2004, which gave trans people the right to new birth certificates appropriate to their gender.

This was a significant victory, won against considerable opposition. However, it continued to box applicants into ‘male’ and ‘female’, making no room for genderqueer or non-binary people. In response, artist-activists Jason Barker and Serge Nicholson staged the first Transfabulous festival in London in 2006: a showcase for artists from the UK, the US and elsewhere to explore their gender positions through performance, and other creative methods. (I attended the final one, in 2008: I explained its role in helping me work out my identity in *Trans: A Memoir*.¹⁵⁹) The festival highlighted the importance of performance as a means of self-expression for trans people, still struggling to fix a terminology that could adequately convey their experiences. Performances could be created quickly and cheaply within self-organised communities: the only essential requirements were a space and an audience.

At this time, British trans activists became less worried about the law or the healthcare system and more concerned about damaging media representation and the failure of traditional gay and lesbian groups to lobby on their behalf. During the 2000s, people became increasingly vocal about mainstream media coverage of trans issues, be it mockery in television comedies from *The League of Gentlemen* to *Little Britain*, hostility to changing gender roles in right-wing publications, or feminist transphobia in liberal-centrist ones. The *Guardian*’s publication of transphobic op-eds by Julie Burchill and Julie Bindel was a lightning rod for trans activism: they were widely shared on message boards, on which people organised to protest against them. In 2008, Stonewall – at that point a gay, lesbian and bisexual pressure group – shortlisted Bindel for its Journalist of the Year award; 150 trans people demonstrated outside the ceremony in London in ‘the largest trans rights demonstration the UK had [*ever*] seen’.¹⁶⁰ Social media also led to the formation of Trans Media Watch, first on Facebook and then as a lobbying group in 2009, in reaction to ITV sitcom *Moving Wallpaper*, in which a trans character was referred to as “it” and as “a walking GM crop”.¹⁶¹ In the early 2010s, pressure from such groups, and individuals, helped trans authors, myself included, get into mainstream media and struggle to change it from within, by showing gatekeepers that audiences *did* want to hear trans voices discussing trans issues. A sense on both sides of the Atlantic that things were

improving (with UK and North American discourses becoming even more intertwined, in a way that reaffirmed the latter's primacy) fed into *Time*'s famous 'Transgender Tipping Point' issue of 2014, which could never have happened without years of conversations within trans communities.

In this chapter I will discuss my final two stories, which cover this period, and explore the politics of 'telling stories' about our lives, in forms besides memoir, and specifically *whose* stories get told, and heard, and where. The first looks at the pitfalls of working within closed circles, in a story about a performance at a 'radical' queer venue; the second at the compromises of working in the mainstream media, in a story about the increasingly porous boundaries between blogging, social media and established newspapers. I will also consider the emergence of trans fiction, focusing on two works from 2013-14, issued by Topside – a New York-based independent press set up to publish works by trans people, about trans people, for trans people, and how changing circumstances in the media and the market led certain authors to feel able to break decisively with non-fictional forms for the first time, and to push towards a third wave of trans writing.

Crossing

The three people interviewed here were all part of a trans/queer performance art and activist group in Brighton in the late 2000s, when the prevalence of a mainstream gay culture fuelled by the ‘Pink Pound’ and (particularly) the commodification of Brighton Pride led a number of individuals – especially trans, genderqueer and non-binary people – to seek a new community and try to create a more radical counter-culture. Although the collective discussed here was short-lived, we feel that the events described below should be included in our oral history of Brighton & Hove’s LGBT community, and hope similar organisations may learn from them.

*

“I thought I could find a safe space in Brighton’s queer scene after so many years of passing, crossing, wandering. Away from misogyny in parts of the British Asian community, racism in British Caucasian circles, and the transphobia in both. But it turned out to be anything but: people not bothering to say hello to me, either because I was brown, or because I was a femme trans woman who was into men, and that was counter-revolutionary.”

– Sabina Tharkur, ‘Crossing’ (Unpublished, 2009.)

MILITANCIJA: I’ll let you decide whose fault it was. I shouldn’t keep having to pick sides.

SABINA THARKUR: I reckon Venus will still blame the uppity brown person.

VENUS N. FURZ: Sabina could have sorted it all out, any time she liked.

SABINA: Told you.

VENUS: I’m not sure if the group could have held together for long, anyway.

MILITANCIJA: Too many egos.

SABINA: Just one, I'd say. But sometimes that's all it takes.

MILITANCIA: It started so well! I put on a queer disco at the Cowley Club [*an anarchist social centre, café, bar and bookshop on London Road*]. I was DJ-ing with a couple of friends, playing The Gossip, Peaches, Jeffree Star. We got a good crowd, and a few people said they'd like to come to more nights like this. Maybe something where they could perform, as well as dance.

VENUS: I'd been going to London, seeing this guy I met in Shoreditch. We went to loads of clubs – Duckie, Trannyshack, Bar Wotever. I saw these phenomenal drag queens at the Royal Vauxhall Tavern who came on as a mistress and a slave – the mistress was dressed up like Rebekah Brooks, the editor of *The Sun*, and the slave was one of her readers, put in bondage and made to read *Sun* headlines, *Clockwork Orange*-style, being whipped whenever s/he said that not all Muslims were terrorists or that transsexuals should be allowed surgery on the NHS. By the end, quoting an old *Sun* editorial about Brighton being 'a nasty town of drugs, gays, AIDS and drunks', s/he admitted: perverts *had* to be wiped out, and only the Tories and the Church "could save our souls!" It was so refreshing to be in a room full of people who felt like I did. And it was as funny as fuck.

MILITANCIA: I'd been in Brighton for four years, and we'd never had a space for anything like that. If you were lucky, you got one of the old drag acts at the Queen's Arms, or the Harlequin, but even that had closed down. Otherwise it was just the bars around the pier, full of straights and twinkles. So, I started looking for venues where we could do something regular ...

VENUS: ... And I was looking for acts who might perform. I loved Jonny Woo and Ma Butcher at Gay Bingo, and Pia's horror-dance, *O Superman*, at Horse Meat Disco, where she came on as this weird Clark Kent in a rubber-doll mask and kept stripping – first down to a Superman costume, then a muscleman, and finally a trans woman, with loads of fake blood to reveal that deep down, we were all just guts. That was cool. I liked Michael Twai's post-drag poem about Stonewall, too – this hot tranny in a blonde wig and black dress, beautiful but never trying to 'pass', talking about a "normal night" where

“you could fuck anyone”. S/he made me feel like I was *in* the queer underground, hanging out with Candy Darling or something. I got more involved, and after I dressed up in a corset, a maid’s outfit with ‘Not Your Slave’ on the tabard in red lipstick, and 4” heels and ran the 100m at the Tranny Olympics, I knew I’d found my calling. In the queer scene, that is, not as an athlete – it took me a few minutes to reach the end. Anyway, I couldn’t afford to move to London – even before the credit crunch – but we could build something at home.

SABINA: The London scene was diverse to a point, but like Brighton: lots of nationalities, but still pretty white. But I went to the final Transfabulous festival that summer (2008) in London and Ignacio Rivera’s act blew my mind. It was all about a butch dyke, trying to get out of Hawaii by dancing for tourists for money. All this stuff about being a girl who wants to be a boy, pretending to be a girly girl to pay for hormones and surgery, all the genders you could choose ... But Rivera never forgot about being a QTIPOC (*queer, trans and/or intersex person of colour*). Nobody had told me you could be Bengali and trans, brown and queer – let alone all these things, *and* a fabulous artist.

MILITANCIA: We liked how Transfabulous responded to the Gender Recognition Act (2004), which only acknowledged people who defined as ‘male’ or ‘female’, with the Festival making space for those who wouldn’t (or couldn’t) tick one of those boxes to explore their identities creatively. We formed a committee, with a few others we’d met around town, or through queer mailing lists, and organised a fundraiser called ‘Recognise Me?’ at the West Hill Community Hall. I’d play some tunes, then we’d show a few short films and introduce a couple of local performers, both of whom I’d met through the Cowley Club: Sabina and Venus.

SABINA: I designed a poster with the name of the night and the group – after we voted to call ourselves ‘NuQueer Power’. Venus’s idea. I modelled my drawing on Zanele Muholi’s photos of black queers in South Africa. Venus said it was “too political”. I guess they meant “the wrong kind of political”. I re-did it without the image and got the committee’s approval...

VENUS: ... And I put them round the gay bars in Kemp Town, took some to the London clubs, posted about it on the forums, got it in the listings for the free Brighton LGBT publications, *GScene* and *3Sixty*, told my mates.

MILITANCIJA: Soon, we were ready to launch. I was so excited!

VENUS: We agreed to show the films first, before Sabina's performance. I would headline and then Mili would DJ.

MILITANCIJA: Everyone loved the films. We had a ten-minute documentary about an Austrian performer called Lucy McEvil, one of Maria Beatty's fetish films, and *Bilocation*, a short piece by two lesbian artists from Slovenia – Marina Gržinić & Aina Šmid.

VENUS: Then Sabina went on.

SABINA: Of course, I worried that my piece might not go down well. You always do, whenever you perform anything, wherever. But I'd given it a lot of thought, and trusted everyone in the room to engage with it, at least.

MILITANCIJA: Sabina and I had spoken about it. I thought it'd be cool.

VENUS: Militancija never read the script. Sabina didn't even bother to mention it to me.

SABINA: I came on dressed in a red bordered sari and bindi, to a soundtrack by Nishat Khan, and asked the audience who they saw. An English woman? A European transsexual? An Asian transgender person? Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi? The music stopped, and I spoke about how my parents had moved to England in the Seventies – Birmingham, then Leicester – so my father could study medicine. I told them about the racist abuse they got, not long after the Tory MP in Birmingham campaigned on the slogan, 'If you want a nigger for a neighbour, vote Liberal or Labour'. How my mother worked in a primary school, and was popular with her pupils until parents started saying they didn't want "one of them" teaching their children.

MILITANCIJA: The crowd had a lot of empathy.

SABINA: I talked about how I was born in Leicester in the early Eighties, the effects of Thatcher, and how my mother was the first to get laid off when the education budget got slashed – the usual divide-and-rule tactics that my parents' Irish friends often mentioned. I rubbed off my bindi and took off the sari – underneath, I was wearing a Leicester City football shirt, jeans and trainers, like I had when I hung out with the guys from school. In place of Nishat Khan, I put on The Smiths – my favourite band as a teenager. I liked them more than the Britpop the white kids were into: Oasis or Blur, all that flag-waving. The Smiths were all about feeling like an outsider, and yet I was listening to them in my attempt to fit in. After all, they still played guitar like the straight lads, and they were still white ... And just as Morrissey sang, *You shut your mouth, how can you say I go about things the wrong way*, I cut the music.

VENUS: It was very moving.

SABINA: And went into *Bengali in Platforms*, from Morrissey's first solo album. That feeling when I found the tape at a charity shop, saw the title (*Viva Hate*) and thought, "He gets me." Then I put the cassette on and heard him sing *Shelve your Western plans and understand / That life is hard enough when you belong here* – implying that I didn't.

MILITANCIJA: Lots of people weren't comfortable – Morrissey was a hero to them.

SABINA: The soundtrack changed – *Ten Ragas to a Disco Beat* by Charanjit Singh, a mixture of Western dance, often appropriated by white people from black communities, and traditional Indian music. I discussed how I tried to embrace my dualities, rather than becoming obsessed with integrating – 'passing' – as the politicians, Labour or Tory, as well as the tabloids and the people around me demanded. About living as a woman. I put the sari on again and recounted some abuse that had been thrown at me: racist, sexist, transphobic. The audience felt divided when I said how 'tranny' had been used as an insult – there were arguments about whether 'we' should try to 'reclaim' it – but they did at least wince when they heard the word 'Paki', like they did when I mentioned Peter

Griffiths' election slogan from the mid-Sixties, safely in the past ... After the silence, I recalled trying to find a space that felt right, embracing bits of British culture I liked while remembering where my family were from.

VENUS: If she'd stopped there, it would've been fine.

SABINA: I took off the sari again, stood on stage in just a bra and undies, vulnerable. There was silence as I draped myself in a Union Jack – Morrissey-style. I talked about how people in the UK knew nothing about Ireland, let alone India. I told them about how my great-grandfather was one of a thousand shot dead by British soldiers in the Amritsar massacre of 1919, and how my grandparents were uprooted by the rioting caused by the partition in 1947, as Muslims in India and Hindus in Pakistan had to flee their homes. I talked about how millions of tons of wheat were exported from India to Britain while we died of starvation – four million Bengalis lost their lives, just in 1943, when Winston Churchill said he hated Indians, 'a beastly people with a beastly religion', and that the famine was our fault 'for breeding like rabbits'.

MILITANCIJA: You could feel the shock in the crowd. They probably weren't the kind who loved Churchill, but they were nearly all British, and conditioned to see him as a hero. Sabina cut through years of that.

SABINA: I dropped the flag. Near-naked, I talked about how British people had no idea about any of this. Instead, they'd tell me how good the Empire was for India, even though India was one of the world's richest countries in 1750 and one of the poorest by 1950. I talked about how white people kept saying the British gifted us railways – ignorant of the fact that they were paid for by Indian taxes, for the East India Company to move stolen resources, without a care for how much they cost "the natives" – who, of course, weren't allowed to work on the trains, even if white-only carriages were soon ditched for economic reasons. I said that not only was this never taught in schools, but white people never even *tried* to educate themselves about it.

MILITANCIJA: The tension in the room was tangible.

VENUS: It was supposed to be fun.

SABINA: I put *Bengali in Platforms* back on, and talked about trying to find a safe space in the Brighton queer scene. Away from the misogyny I'd encountered in parts of the British Asian community, the racism in British Caucasian circles, and the transphobia I'd experienced in both. But it had proved to be anything but: people not bothering to say hello to me, either because I was brown, or because I was a femme trans woman who was into men, and that was counter-revolutionary. People parroting the same ignorant clichés to me about the benefits of Empire, or asking where I was “really” from, seeing India, Pakistan and Bangladesh as one big colony. Telling me I was “always bringing up racism” and that they had always opposed it “by telling people not to say the N-word”, but never going any further – never reading books or watching films by brown or black people, always making us do the emotional labour of ‘proving’ that something was racist. I ended by reminding them that as an artist, my role was to ask questions. It was their responsibility to work out the answers.

VENUS: I thought she'd leave the stage with a mic drop.

MILITANCIA: I yelled, “Let's give it up for Sabina Tharkur!” A couple of people clapped.

VENUS: They'd come to feel supported, not hectored.

MILITANCIA: I tried again, but didn't get much more of a response. I carried on. “Please give a big welcome to our headline act, Venus N. Furz!”

VENUS: How was I meant to follow that?

SABINA: Venus had plenty of friends there. People whistled when she came on, at least.

VENUS: I did my best to change the mood. My piece was called ‘Nancy Boy’. I tied my hair in bunches, plastered my face in purple eyeshadow and my beard in glitter, wore a sequinned silver dress with ‘tranny’ daubed across it in lipstick, ripped fishnets with neon-pink heels. I ran on to the Placebo song, joining in with Brian Molko on “Comes across

all shy and coy / Just another nancy boy.” I’d done that in rehearsal; the idea of me being shy and coy had got a big laugh. On the night? Sweet Fanny Adams. Just as Molko got to “Different partner / every night”, I yelled “Hang on!” I stopped the track and pointed at the speakers:

“Is he trying to say that I’m a slag?”

Pockets of laughter – nothing more. I’m a professional, so I soldiered on. I talked about how I’d fallen into “the trap of passing”, struggling to look like a 6ft woman, but just looking like a lanky bloke looking like a giant woman trying not to look like a tall man. I held my head back and gulped, as if worried about getting the shit kicked out of me, but I was just making an exhibition of my Adam’s apple.

I repeated bits of Agrado’s monologue in Pedro Almodóvar’s *All about My Mother* about doing sex work to pay for cosmetic surgery so she became more authentic. “I didn’t have money or time for that,” I said. “I was too busy being *me*. *Becoming me*.”

“Through endless sex – frantic, tantric, not always fantastic but sometimes ecstatic – I let the boys find the girl in me, and this beautiful butterfly began to emerge, spreading its incandescent wings. My body is the sword and my identity is the pen: mighty, fighting, finally uniting, I’m a proud gender outlaw, planning a *coup d’état* to establish the Dictatorship of the Divine.” When I did that at Trannyshack the year before, there were cheers – actual cheers – and I was told London crowds were hard to please!

By now, it was obvious – this lot were poison. Every self-effacing quip got taken literally; every gag bombed through the floor. I tried to expand on different experiences: blokes on websites for ‘T-girls and their admirers’ who told me they were wanking over my photos in their wives’ knickers, or asking me to dress them like babies and spank them until they cried; men who’d gone to bed with me for the first time and puked, like in *The Crying Game* or *Ace Ventura*; guys who’d tell me they were crazy *about* me one moment, then went crazy *at* me the next. I put *Nancy Boy* back on – I’d cut it up a bit – and on the line, “It all breaks down at the role reversal,” I took off my wig and dress and confronted the

audience with my maleness – my manhood. Even *that* didn't get a rise. Sorry – no pun intended, honestly ...

“Here I am,” I said. “Finally coming home – coming out – to my people.” Again, not a peep. Maybe the nudity shocked them. God knows what they were doing there. I put the dress back on, snatched the wig and walked offstage.

MILITANCIA: I tried to get a party started with *Fuck the Pain Away* by Peaches.

VENUS: S/he might as well have played the bloody *Funeral March*.

SABINA: The look Venus gave me as they came off stage was unreal – I hadn't seen that since my last Anti-Nazi League demo in Leicester. I went backstage (the kitchen) and asked Venus if they were alright. I just got told I “shouldn't have spoiled the vibe like that”. I wondered what they meant – apparently it “wasn't that kind of party”. I replied, “What kind of party *is* it then?” Not a word.

MILITANCIA: I left my friend Olga in charge of the decks and went to check on Venus and Sabina. I caught Venus storming out and told them we'd discuss it all at our next meeting. Venus went “Yeah, whatever,” and left. Sabina seemed quite shaken: I had to go back to the booth, but I hugged her and said we'd go to the meeting together. I texted Venus, but no reply.

SABINA: I felt like Venus should do their own reading about queer scenes and race. They were always going on about *Nobody Passes* by Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore, so I thought they had.

MILITANCIA: They did show up, at least.

SABINA: And immediately assumed they'd be the chair.

VENUS: It was my turn. We'd agreed that the last time.

SABINA: Venus didn't think it appropriate to stand down.

VENUS: Why should I?

MILITANCIJA: After a long argument, it was decided – by a single vote – that I'd take over.

SABINA: The first thing Venus did was ask if one vote was sufficient.

VENUS: Get someone who calls herself 'Militancija' to resolve a conflict. *Genius*.

MILITANCIJA: I managed to keep them both at the table. They sat glaring at each other.

SABINA: Me on one side; Venus and their mates on the other.

MILITANCIJA: I had to start with a review of Saturday's event.

VENUS: Everyone sighed.

SABINA: Which annoyed Venus, who'd come for the back-slapping.

VENUS: All I said was that Sabina's piece might have scared some people off. Then I suggested we agree all performances before the events. Not the scripts – just the general content.

MILITANCIJA: I said we shouldn't make anyone justify themselves.

SABINA: But that's what happened. I said it was a Stalinist nightmare.

VENUS: Which was a wild over-reaction. Anyway, Sabina had defenders.

SABINA: One person, who wasn't scared of Venus's gang.

MILITANCIJA: Who said her performance *was* exactly what we should be doing, and that we shouldn't compromise our spontaneity.

VENUS: But that was no good if people stopped coming. As my friend, Julie Binder, asked – what about our safe space policy?

SABINA: That was meant to protect people of colour, not shut them down.

MILITANCIJA: By this time, the meeting was hopelessly split. I was hammering the table with my fist and telling everyone to calm down.

VENUS: I told Sabina that wasn't fair. I'd been to anti-BNP (*British National Party*) demos, and some of my friends supported the Anti-Nazi League.

SABINA: Which just made it worse that they wouldn't listen to me. (I didn't say it, but Venus had never mentioned anything about Antifa before.)

MILITANCIJA: The room stopped dead.

SABINA: I asked Venus and friends to reflect on who gets to speak, and on which terms. Then, I told them more about racism and trans-misogyny I'd experienced in the queer scene. If they'd read *Whipping Girl* by Julia Serano (2007) about 'Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity', I said, they might recognise it. I mentioned how I was told the first queer night at the Cowley was run by AFAB (*Assigned Female at Birth*) people *for* AFAB people, and that someone on the door had told me to wear a longer skirt. Then I explained how more than one person on the dancefloor thought it was fine to shove their hands up my dress, just because I was trans. They all said they'd never seen any of that.

VENUS: We weren't saying it didn't happen. Just that we didn't know about it.

MILITANCIJA: I suggested we focus on the future – how we could make the space safer for everyone. But Sabina took it as silencing, and I realised it was the wrong thing to say.

SABINA: Unlike some, Militancija apologised straight away. I said I'd still like to perform, even if I wasn't comfortable with having to discuss it up front.

VENUS: "Fine", I replied, "but I'm not sure I want to perform with you."

MILITANCIJA: I tried to remain impartial, but by now it was impossible.

VENUS: Bollocks, s/he took Sabina's side.

SABINA: S/he just reiterated that no-one should be barred from performing.

VENUS: *No-one?* What if one of the BNP's LGBT branch wanted to do a set?

MILITANCIJA: "Don't be ridiculous", I said.

SABINA: So then Venus and their mates accused Militancija and me of silencing *them*.

VENUS: They were!

MILITANCIJA: I made another error, making the first one worse. I suggested a vote.

SABINA: You know that saying "scratch a liberal, find a Tory"? Sometimes you scratch a radical and find a liberal.

MILITANCIJA: I said sorry. Again. We ended with no resolution, and no second date.

VENUS: I walked out.

SABINA: Me too.

MILITANCIJA: Really, that was the end of the group.

VENUS: No-one ever said that.

SABINA: I started looking for other places to hang out. But that's the trouble with a town this size – it's big enough to have a lot of different scenes, but only one of each, so if you fall out with a scene, or it collapses, or it's just not for you, that's it. I tried some of the bars near the sea front, but they were for white gay guys, who didn't want to talk to me, except to take the piss out of my clothes, or occasionally hit on me and then laugh about it. Anyway, I found them quite old school, even though they were new, and pretty dull.

MILITANCIJA: One night I was walking back to my little flat on Montague Street, and bumped into Sabina. We hadn't seen each other since that meeting, and she looked lonely.

SABINA: I felt alienated from everyone and wanted to move. Maybe London, maybe Kolkata. But I was skint.

MILITANCIJA: At first, she didn't want to talk, but I said I wanted to be friends and offered her a drink. I realised I'd have to apologise – she was more gracious than I might have been.

SABINA: Mili suggested we start our own night. But where? And with whom?

MILITANCIJA: We decided to try the Marlborough Theatre on Princes Street. It had been my favourite hang-out when I first came here from Split, playing pool with the local lesbians who loved having a baby dyke.

SABINA: Mili spoke to a friend there, and we got a date. We'd still have to promote it through all the usual venues, though, including the ones I'd finished with. We got to the Cowley to find Venus had left flyers for the next 'NuQueer Power' night at the West Hill Hall – which we knew nothing about, and which they were headlining (obviously).

MILITANCIJA: Same date that we'd planned. Sabina was furious.

SABINA: Fucking right I was! They had no right to do that, they-

MILITANCIJA: I tried to get her to calm down – the barman at the Cowley was looking at us, and if I hadn't taken Sabina outside, he might have asked us to leave, which would've made everything worse. I said it may have been coincidence, but Sabina was having none of it. She was shaking but there was nowhere for her emotion to go. I said we should react with something positive. The Brighton Fringe Festival was coming up – I suggested she expand her piece into a solo show. I'd DJ and compere.

SABINA: That sounded good. I'd co-organise it with Queers Against Racism.

MILITANCIJA: We secured a slot at the Marly – changing it to the night after Venus's gig. We decided to go to their show at the West Hill Hall, and hand out our flyers there.

SABINA: We got there just after the start time. I don't know who was on the door, but it wasn't anyone from the committee, so we got straight in.

MILITANCIJA: We hung out at the back, watching Venus lap up all the praise from their mates.

SABINA: We wondered if they'd boot us out, but they were too self-absorbed, as ever.

MILITANCIJA: I hardly recognised anyone. I thought I knew all the queers in Brighton.

SABINA: No people of colour, surprisingly enough. Eventually, I did see a few familiars – they shot me a few swift, disapproving glances, but no more than that.

MILITANCIJA: "I've got your back," I assured her.

SABINA: When Venus came on to introduce the first performer, I held up a Queers Against Racism placard.

MILITANCIJA: Not popular. But necessary.

SABINA: At first, they just tried to ignore it. But then a commotion rose up in the crowd.

VENUS: I carried on.

MILITANCIA: Someone yelled, “Our shows call out racism!”

SABINA: Then: “You just hate white people!”

VENUS: I told the crowd to calm down – everyone was there to have a good time.

MILITANCIA: The first performer was one of Venus’s friends, Victor/Victorious, who’d been at the Cowley Club meeting. The usual stuff about sometimes hiding your chest, other times wearing a bra, sometimes being a man, sometimes a woman. A tad self-indulgent and a bit predictable, but nothing offensive.

SABINA: If you’d never been to any queer nights in London, it might’ve been a revelation. To be fair, some of the younger people hadn’t.

VENUS: I came back to introduce the second act – Radclyffe Hell.

MILITANCIA: I thought it might be alright – a swipe at reality television.

SABINA: A white person’s anti-racist show. Probably at Venus’s insistence.

VENUS: It was going to deal with the scandal on *Celebrity Big Brother*, but Jade Goody – one of the people who’d hurled racist (and transphobic) abuse at Indian actress Shilpa Shetty, saying Shetty had “a big hairy face” and “looked like a man” and taking the piss out of her accent – died just before we did the gig, so Radclyffe had to rethink.

MILITANCIA: Radclyffe announced that s/he’d dressed as Davina McCall, who used to host those shows.

VENUS: Inspired by that drag show I’d seen at the RVT, Victor and I played The Audience. Vic said it was fun to dress up like a typical chav – can of Stella, Adidas trackie

bottoms and football T-shirt, Brylcreem hair – and for me to be his bird, in hoop earrings, pink crop top and jeans, diamanté stilettos. Riotous laughter.

MILITANCIA: Sabina murmured to me: “So fucking radical, having a stab at the povvos.”

SABINA: I couldn’t be arsed with a more thoughtful critique. They didn’t *know* that working class communities had always contained anti-racist elements along with the racist ones, as well as some brown and black people, because they didn’t *know* any brown or black or working-class people. So I just booed. It was quite cathartic.

VENUS: I should’ve known *someone* would object to it.

MILITANCIA: Nobody joined us. The atmosphere strained further with each line of their show.

VENUS: Sabina and Mili wouldn’t give us a chance, but we were building towards a twist. Radclyffe – Davina – was trying to apologise to the “viewers at home” about “the kind of vile abuse that we never could have anticipated when we locked a bunch of people with reputations for being unpleasant and uneducated into a house and broadcast it for a nation full of insecure, beer-chugging nobodies to knock them off their unearned pedestals”. But halfway through the sentence, Mili yelled, “Bougie bullshit!”

MILITANCIA: Seriously, even David fucking Cameron wouldn’t have said something like that. Not when he was still pretending not to be posh, anyway.

VENUS: Everyone told hir to shut up. Correctly.

SABINA: Actually, a few people laughed. Correctly.

VENUS: They laughed because the next thing that happened was that Victor and me – The Masses – reached through the TV screen and kidnapped Davina. We tied her up, S&M style, with a ball gag and handcuffs, and made her sit on the couch, while we stepped into the frame and replaced her in the world of celebrity. We winked at the audience and said,

“Wouldn’t you like to see *this* on the telly?” Then we stripped down to our underwear and made out.

SABINA: Proles! Shed the trappings of your class and your identity! Then you may be liberated!

VENUS: Oh, for fuck’s sake.

MILITANCIJA: They got a dizzying reception – whistling, whooping, the works.

SABINA: They kept smooching until the applause finally died down. Then Venus came on and took a bow, lapping it up before yelling, “Now it’s time for the star of the show ...”

MILITANCIJA: Venus’s friends practically waved their clapping hands under my nose.

SABINA: Venus’s act was about “wreckers” in the queer scene – “enemies of free speech”.

VENUS: No, it was about unity.

SABINA: “Enemies of free speech”?

VENUS: That was ironic. Anyway – no different from you calling us Stalinists, is it?

SABINA: As you said on stage.

VENUS: What made you do this interview with me, anyway?

SABINA: The writer told me you’d agreed to do it, and I wasn’t going to let you go unchallenged. Surprised you bothered to come back down for it, to be honest.

VENUS: As it happens, the writer said the same thing about you, and I wasn’t going to let you chat shit about me again. As I was saying – the piece was about how we’re stronger

together. I came on in a rainbow flag with *United* by Throbbing Gristle as a backdrop, singing ‘Love is the law’ along with Genesis P. Orridge.

SABINA: Vacuous.

VENUS: I talked about how I’d always had Asian friends, ever since I was a kid ...

MILITANCIJA: That old chestnut.

VENUS: ... even though I grew up in a really white town. I spoke about how the school bullies who beat up anyone who called them out for picking on anyone who wasn’t white.

SABINA: No mention of what it means to be in a really white town *now*, of course.

VENUS: Black, white, queer, trans – they wanted to kick the shit out of all of us. When they grew up, they used the ballot box, rather than bovver boots. Most of them. Their violence united us – or, at least, it should have.

MILITANCIJA: “There’s more than unites us than divides us!”

SABINA: People actually *cheered*. As if they’d never heard that before. As if it was anything other than specious liberal bullshit.

VENUS: The BNP would wipe us out unless we all stood together, I said. I played that bit from the BBC’s *Question Time* where Nick Griffin talked about a non-violent Ku Klux Klan.

MILITANCIJA: Easy to call out racism when it’s blindingly obvious.

SABINA: And happens somewhere else.

VENUS: I didn’t want it to be too one-sided, so I asked: have we become *too* politically correct?

MILITANCIJA: Thank God someone finally asked *that* question.

SABINA: “You’re not allowed to talk about immigration now, are you?”

VENUS: That’s nothing like what I said. Stop putting words in my mouth.

SABINA: I’m just trying to help you keep your foot out of it.

VENUS: Right, fuck this, I’m off.

SABINA: Demanding unity and then flouncing. Just like when you moved to London.

VENUS: The London scene was far more interesting. Why would anyone stay here?

SABINA: Not everyone has a banker boyfriend who can just rent them a flat.

VENUS: Not everyone has a boyfriend, eh? Seriously though, I’m amazed that anyone thinks this is even worth recording, to be honest. Small town people with small town minds in a small-time scene. Good bye and good riddance.

MILITANCIJA: Shall we carry on?

SABINA: We did last time. For my show at the Marly, at least.

MILITANCIJA: The people who *needed* to see Sabina’s show didn’t turn up.

SABINA: And Venus moved away not long after.

MILITANCIJA: Venus’s friends started some new queer disco – no performances, just parties. I can’t remember what they were called – someone told me that they ripped off my playlists, but that was the closest I ever got to it.

SABINA: I never wanted to go. They probably barred me, anyway. I thought about moving to London as well, however much it would cost – the city would be big enough for me to find my people – but every time I saw a night being plugged on Facebook, Venus was all over the comments, even if they weren't actually performing. They really did make Brighton feel like a million miles from London, for me at least.

MILITANCIJA: At least you got to have your say.

SABINA: Yeah, but who's going to listen?

Crossing and British trans theory, praxis and performance

By the late 2000s, critiques of the ‘first wave’ of trans writing – that is, the transition memoir – were barely relevant in the United Kingdom. Morris’s *Conundrum* remained the UK’s most widely read trans author, and when I came out as transsexual in 2009, I was often asked if I’d read it, but mainly by cisgender people many years older than me. At that point, I realised that no significant trans memoirs had been published in the UK since April Ashley and Caroline Cossey’s books in the early 1980s, and that of that triumvirate, only *Conundrum* remained in print. I got the impression that none of the younger trans people I knew in Brighton were interested in these books, and especially not in Morris; we were inspired instead by the ‘second wave’ authors who had criticised these memoirs, and who were still alive, still publishing, and accessible via email or early social networks. This online presence, along with their appearances at Transfabulous between 2006 and 2008, helped to reduce the distance between them and the emergent trans communities in London, Manchester and Brighton. The UK did not produce any prominently published trans writers or theorists in the 2000s – instead, it gave rise to a number of festivals and regular nights (such as Bar Wotever at London’s Royal Vauxhall Tavern, and its spin-off in Brighton) that hosted performances by trans and non-binary people, aimed primarily (but not exclusively) at trans and non-binary people, in the hope of building a diverse, confident community.

Set in Brighton in 2009, *Crossing* is my first story to cover a scene in which I was involved. Given that I discussed this scene extensively in *Trans: A Memoir*, the question remains: why use fiction? The first reason is that the memoir form meant that I could only discuss real-life episodes in which I was directly and actively involved, and could only do so from the perspective of a white, middle-class transsexual woman. Wanting to document the exclusions I experienced within Brighton’s queer community (which I sought out after finding that the ‘LGBT’ label given to many social spaces and activist organisations often meant only token trans inclusion), I could talk about ‘trans-misogyny’, which Julia Serano described as an attitude in which people ‘didn’t have much of a problem with transgender people per se, just so long as they were male- or masculine-identified rather than female- or feminine-identified.’

This ‘privileging of trans men over trans women,’ wrote Serano, ‘is not merely a bias held by certain individuals, but rather one that is often institutionalized within queer women’s culture and organisations.’¹⁶² I felt this in Brighton at the time that *Whipping Girl* was published, but being white and middle-class, it was difficult for me to talk about how this culture’s struggles to deal with issues around class and race directly affected me, although I often read about this, or discussed it with friends – especially after Brighton’s Queer Mutiny group collapsed in 2011 over its failure to acknowledge, let alone act upon, critiques that suggested a film it planned to screen at a festival was racist.¹⁶³ To explore this, I needed to invent characters, being careful not to create two-dimensional people of colour purely to make my collection more diverse, nor to write in a way that simply appropriated the experiences of those directly affected by racism. Getting around these pitfalls – as far as possible – meant thinking carefully about form.

Crossing is told as an oral history, (I borrow this format from the QueenSpark publication *Brighton Trans*Formed* for which I wrote a foreword, in 2014) in which three trans and/or non-binary characters interrogate the uses and limits of performance as a means of self-expression, for an unnamed writer/editor collecting testimony about the collapse of an artist-activist collective called NuQueer Power. This form reflects the heterogeneous nature of the performance art circuit, in which several acts would appear on any given night to show the diversity of its participants – not just in terms of gender identity, but also race, nationality and background, and *class*, which was often elided from New Labour-era concepts of ‘diversity’. It also recalls the collections of voices such as *PoMoSexuals*, referenced above, and nods to the intersectional approaches to feminist and queer politics that got traction in the early 21st century. Above all, it highlights one of the tragedies of minority organising: that we set up autonomous spaces to be safe from the hostility of the wider world, but this often means we project our own traumas, internalised discrimination and unchecked prejudices onto each other, in a way that is all the more painful because it happens in places we’ve fought hard to find, or to set up. *Crossing* is my only story to exclude cisgender people almost entirely – the gender of the person collating the testimonies is never stated, although the interviewees break the fourth wall to question this person’s motives. Unlike in *The Twist*, the reliability of the trans people’s testimonies is left to the reader, although all its characters question each other’s statements at points. Crucially, this oral history form allows me to make criticisms of

trans and queer ‘communities’, and people, that I do not make so explicitly when my characters are operating in cisgender frameworks: Frank and Laura in *Dancing in the Devil*, and even Zelda in *The Twist*, are presented as making bad decisions in difficult situations rather than, like one of the protagonists here, functioning purely out of self-interest.

None of the three interviewees in *Crossing* fit neatly into the Gender Recognition Act’s ‘male’ or ‘female’ boxes. Trans-feminine performer Venus N. Furz, born and raised in England, and trans-masculine Croatian DJ/ organiser Militancija are non-binary (using *they* and *their*, by this point becoming established as the most common gender-neutral pronouns, rather than Feinberg’s *ze* or *hir*), and they represent Brighton’s social and racial make-up, both being white and middle-class. Sabina, born in Leicester to cross-class Indian parents, talks about ‘living as a [*trans*] woman’ but never makes her gender status explicit. Instead, she explains how her performance about racism and misogyny in white and Asian British communities exposed unexamined prejudices in their collective, suggesting that despite its refusal to operate within established structures, it had just as many bad power dynamics as the ‘straight’ spaces (including more mainstream LGBT ones) it rejected. The collective calls itself ‘queer’ but Sabina finds that ‘discrimination ... because of [*her*] feminine gender expression’ is rife, and that this is one of those queer communities that Julia Serano identified in *Excluded* as being ‘centred on sameness rather than difference’ and ‘closed [*and*] insular ... rather than open’.¹⁶⁴ (Indeed, some of the NuQueer Power collective members seem to think that because they identify as queer, they cannot possibly hold racist prejudices, have internalised ‘trans-misogyny’ or have any other blind spots.)

In their testimonies, Venus and Sabina discuss their performances – both of which, like the ‘theoretical’ texts above, are highly autobiographical – as well as their differing opinions of each other’s work, and the impact that each had on the audience, and the collective. They draw on different lines of trans and genderqueer performance, which allows *Crossing* to create a sense that a trans history has built up over the 150 years covered in my previous stories: Venus references a white, North American set of counter-cultural performers such as The Cockettes, actors such as Mario Montez who starred in Jack Smith’s films, the Theatre of the Ridiculous group that emerged in New York during

the 1960s, and British ‘genderqueer’ performers like Jonny Woo, Ma Butcher and others, who became popular at mid-2000s London club nights such as Duckie, Horse Meat Disco, and Trannyshack. Both Venus and Sabina were inspired by Transfabulous, but only Sabina talks about it. The act she mentions is Ignacio Rivera – a non-binary artist/activist of colour whose *Dancer*, ‘about a butch dyke, trying to get out of Hawaii by dancing for tourists ... [as] a girly girl to pay for hormones and surgery’ teaches her that ‘you could be Bengali and trans, brown and queer ... and a fabulous artist’.¹⁶⁵

Crossing explores a scene that could never have existed without Judith Butler’s influential 1990s works about the performativity of gender, or – more importantly – Sandy Stone and her successors (made widely accessible in the UK in the *Transgender Studies Reader*). It also looks at how Feinberg’s ‘transgender’ umbrella could not stop the collective from replicating old divisions between transsexual people and trans people who don’t want to undergo the process of transition via hormones and surgery. Seeing non-binary people like themselves as a vanguard, Venus and friends implicitly castigate transsexual people for conforming to gender stereotypes, like parts of the ‘radical’ feminist movements they claim to react against. Venus’ script contrasts transsexual Agrado’s monologue about authenticity in Pedro Almodóvar’s *All about My Mother* (1999) with their own interest in ‘becoming me’, self-positioning as a radical non-conformist, with transsexual women (once again) cast as unthinking replicators of traditional femininity.¹⁶⁶

Sabina’s performance addresses this, reiterating Agrado’s point that traditional gender roles are often adopted as a means of self-protection, in her case alongside her efforts to ‘pass’ or at least ‘integrate’ into white society. Her discussion of ‘embracing bits of British culture I liked while remembering where my family were from’ works on its surface, but also describes how she became comfortable with her gender presentation.¹⁶⁷ Then she starts to implicate the audience in racist structures: first by highlighting their ignorance of British imperialist crimes such from the Amritsar massacre of 1919 to the massacres that accompanied the ill-managed partition in August 1947, via the Bengal famine of 1943-44 for which she blames the education system rather than individuals. Secondly, by calling out their willingness to ignore or forgive Morrissey’s open racism because they liked The Smiths; and lastly, by discussing the injustice in being slated for

“always bringing up racism” or expected to do the “emotional labour of ‘proving’ something was racist”.¹⁶⁸ Unsettled by this conclusion, the audience give Sabina a lukewarm response, and aren’t in the mood for Venus’s self-celebratory act. Venus resents Sabina, complaining in her testimony that the event “was supposed to be fun”.¹⁶⁹ Through my use of a dialogue-only conflict, which pits three complex characters directly against each other, as well as the party setting, I ‘spoil the fun’ by choosing a form that lets me highlight intra-community political tensions in a way that the previous stories have not. This may risk being didactic (although, as a longstanding fan of, for example, Brecht and Soviet cinema, this does not bother me), but I tried to align the reader with the narrator, forcing them to decide who is in the wrong, who they would have sided with and how they might have handled this situation.

In an essay in Bernstein Sycamore’s *Nobody Passes* entitled ‘Why Mahmud Can’t Be a Pilot’, Naeem Mohaiemen talks about how British colonialists selected the Bengalis to be “gentle” and “bookish” and raised *[them]* to be the Empire’s accountants, not its fighting force’ with a residual ‘latent cultural distrust of overt enthusiasm and energy’.¹⁷⁰ Sabina finds that the perception of her as an ‘angry activist’ makes the group wary, and she becomes painfully aware of just how white Brighton’s queer community is – as the title of Mohaiemen’s piece suggests, Asian people in the 2000s, especially Asian Muslims, operated in the shadow of 9/11, the London bombings of July 2005 and heightened media focus on Al-Qaeda and Arabic terrorism, even if white-led radical movements opposed the Iraq war and Islamophobia. Venus’s bad faith reference to the collective’s ‘safe space policy’, where they claim that Sabina’s performance has made them (as a white person) feel threatened, particularly annoys Sabina; after she doubts Venus’s claim to have been involved in anti-Fascist activism in the wake of the 11 September attacks, saying ‘Venus had never mentioned *[it]* before’, the rift is irreconcilable.¹⁷¹

Consequently, the group splits, and Sabina falls into several categories of the ‘Top Ten People Most Excluded from Your Genderqueer Scene’ listed in Rocko Bulldagger’s essay ‘The End of Genderqueer’ in *Nobody Passes*: People of colour; Femmes; ‘Transwomen and others who insist on continuing to use female pronouns’; ‘People who do not wear the uniform’; ‘People over twenty-seven’; ‘Transsexuals who have “fully” transitioned, however you define that today’ (here it’s living full-time as a woman); and, most tellingly,

‘People who aren’t kissing your ass right now’.¹⁷² After this split, Venus keeps using the ‘NuQueer Power’ name and assumes total control – like Robert Watt-Chambers in *The Twist*, doubling down when confronted with criticism is their means of winning the power struggle. Venus moves to London to further their career, leaving Sabina painfully aware that, given how much the UK’s performance and activist scene was centred around the capital, she will remain isolated in Brighton – that she gives the final word to the story’s collator provides scant consolation.¹⁷³

As had happened in the 1970s, it had become apparent that these new autonomous spaces were not always free of prejudices, and (even worse) often replicated the ones found in trans-exclusionary activist organisations and media outlets to which they hoped to provide a preferable alternative – Julia Serano’s *Excluded* provided confirmation, and a forensic analysis, of their problems. At the same time, UK activists realised that leaving the mainstream media unchecked meant that it would continue to spread damaging falsehoods about trans and non-binary people, which could translate into public opinion hardening against us, and even in legal gains being overturned. Certainly, plenty of British trans people had the same realisation as me at the same time: if we were going to change this, we might have to get our hands dirty.

*Tipping Point***Ed's Space****ABOUT ME****Edward**

Trans man in Belfast. Writes about the NHS
& the press. Dreamer/drop-out. He/him.

Tuesday, 20 May 2014

Just Another Story?

I don't know why I keep going with this (apart from you guys telling me to). Plenty of people have documented their transitions in a better way than me – they've certainly found a bigger platform – and besides, all we ever hear about is people 'telling their stories', which are always about their personal journeys and never about housing, unemployment or healthcare, except maybe in passing if it relates to them (and their relative privilege).

As you probably know, I've spent three years on the NHS pathway – drawn out by [secretaries sending letters to the wrong address](#) so I missed appointments (and nearly had to start from scratch); getting told by the doctors that I had to "take the Real Life Experience more seriously" after I went to my cousin Gerry's wedding as a woman to keep Dad onside, then blamed for "rushing things" when he stopped talking to me anyway; by having to stop smoking and lose weight. But after all that, I'm *finally* noticing the effects of testosterone.

And, as I'm sure a few of you will understand, it *does* make it all worth it. My voice is breaking (which is embarrassing sometimes, but still) and yesterday I bought my first electric shaver – although I'm growing a beard. It's exciting, and I'm looking forward to writing more about it.

However, that does mean I can't let Dad live in denial any more. He can accept me or not, but I suspect he won't. (It reminds me of how he got me into Formula 1 when I was little but always thought it weird that "a lass" liked it.) It was such a battle with the wedding two years ago, let alone Mum's funeral in 2011, but frankly, he had no right to tell me how to handle that.

The kids around Cliftonville Road are hardly the Shankill Butchers (and obviously this is easier than it would have been thirty years ago, not least because back then the troops would've been even worse) but there's no way to the Jobcentre without walking past them. Now they recognise me, and if I do anything other than pretend to ignore them, they'll kick off. They haven't yet but now things with the [Falls Road](#) are calming down, they're looking for a new target.

And the dole ... since [I lost my job at the Sure Start centre](#) (because of 'the cuts', they said, but it was only *me* they let go), I've constantly worried about getting kicked off the pathway, as the Clinic demands the RLE includes part-time or full-time employment, study or voluntary work. (I wrote about the joys of being a trans man facing the public in a charity shop [here](#).) I'm trying to find a job. Any job, whether it uses my GNVQ or not, before they inevitably sanction me. But the problem, which the Jobcentre staff, let alone Cameron, Osborne and co. are incapable of realising, *is the jobs don't exist*. (I'm sure they're going to go for the Housing Associations next – not that anyone is talking about it, or likely to stop it.)

On the plus side, I've found a community through writing here, and more recently on Twitter. Suddenly, Belfast doesn't feel quite such a backwater. We don't just talk about the NHS and transitioning, but also this recent anti-trans backlash in 'left-wing' media (turns out it's not just me who hears the phrase 'gender-critical' and immediately thinks of Alan Partridge calling himself 'homo-sceptic' ...) and even *stuff that has nothing to do with being trans at all*.

Imagine!

Saturday, 31 May 2014

Tipping Point

Everyone on [Twitter](#) (including quite a few of you who read this blog, as well as the loser who writes it) is talking about the new issue of *Time* magazine. You know the one – with a big picture of Laverne Cox on the front, beside the words ‘TRANSGENDER TIPPING POINT’ and a sub-heading about ‘America’s next civil rights frontier’.

It’s big – big enough for the London lot to look outside the capital, although as usual, it’s at the USA rather than anywhere else in the UK. (I pointed this out and got the old ‘Why don’t you move here?’ I couldn’t be bothered to go through all that again.)

I wondered how many of the people arguing about it – especially the self-proclaimed ‘radical’ journos for ‘left-wing’ papers who are apparently ‘nice’ even if they spend all day demanding they go unchallenged as they insist that trans people aren’t real and that listening to kids with gender dysphoria is ‘child abuse’ – had actually *read* it. I ignored them, subscribed to *Time* and sat down with it.

As often, it was a response to readers asking where the trans people were – in this case, why Cox wasn’t featured in *Time*’s online 100 Most Influential People poll even though she got one of the highest votes. To be fair, this was better than the ‘We considered your complaint, but ...’ crap we’re usually fobbed off with, let alone the entitled whining about ‘trolls’ (or, as some wag put it on Twitter, ‘the less famous of two sides in an online argument’).

The piece repeated the shibboleth of ‘America’s next civil rights frontier’ (as if there were no other frontiers, and trans rights were new) and made Cox their first ever openly trans cover star, backing that up with a detailed interview, where she says, ‘There’s not just one trans story, there’s not just one trans experience’. (I liked how she talked about being taught not to associate being trans with being successful – or, to be associate being trans with *not* being successful.)

The article itself? I was expecting to be annoyed by it, even as I tried to remember that it was written for a cisgender audience rather than us. It opened by wowing at ‘men in deep V-necks and necklaces’ and ‘women with crew cuts and plaid shirts’, like they were writing a follow-up to *Lola* by The Kinks. But I guess that’s standard journalistic ‘colour’ – we’re always good for that – and it was kind-spirited, which is more than you say for most of this stuff.

It was weird how it suggested that now ‘same-sex’ marriage is legal (in the US), gay rights were won, implying trans rights would be even harder for Republican rednecks to swallow. It quoted a few saying just that, banging on about ‘men in women’s bathrooms’, doing the old ‘What if I pretended to be black?’ routine as though any of them gave a shit about racism, and speculating that ‘transsexuals’ could somehow make the US military worse than in Afghanistan or Iraq. (No-one mentioned Chelsea Manning. Perhaps they didn’t know who she was?)

It did at least trace trans visibility back to [Christine Jorgensen](#), even if it dead-named her and a few interviewees, especially the younger ones. To be fair, they talked to some good people: [Jamison Green](#) and [Susan Stryker](#), who described life in the closet as ‘like being locked in a dark room with my eyes and ears cut off and my tongue cut out’. (They ignored the anti-trans ‘feminists’ entirely – for once. Ha!)

A couple of linguistic points:

- 1) ‘transsexual’ as a noun rather than an adjective
- 2) More seriously, implying that hormone replacement therapy and puberty blockers have the same effect, when the former leads to permanent physical changes; the latter stalls them. (this sort of misinformation could have big repercussions for our healthcare.)

All told, the article was best when it talked about how the internet has changed our lives. It mentioned an app, Refuge Restrooms, which points out gender-neutral bathrooms around the world, and the Cox interview highlighted the uses of connecting with people

online when there were no openly trans people around you – that’s certainly been my experience – and how and why more varied media representations were helpful.

Which leads onto my main point. Cox is not from a privileged background, and still has to put up with transphobia, misogyny and racism even now, but her fame does give her *power*, and insulates her from the biggest dangers of cross-gender living. (She knows this, of course, and speaks well on it whenever she’s asked to.)

Does visibility equal freedom?

Why is mainstream media so hung up on it?

Will better representation lead to improved healthcare, housing or employment prospects?

Might it lead to us getting legislated against or beaten up *more*, as reactionaries start to learn what their enemy looks like, and how best to hurt us?

Is it going to do anything about the murder rate – especially for trans women of colour in the global south?

What’s going to be *their* tipping point, and how will we know when it arrives?

Monday, 2 June 2014

Dance to the radio?

I never knew what to expect from writing this blog. To be honest, I only worked out why I was doing it by doing it, and then from getting feedback from other bloggers, and especially trans people who came from [TransNational](#) and other forums. Gradually, I figured out people wanted me to talk less about Formula 1 or *The Prisoner* and more about transitioning via the NHS, so I did. That brought in more people, different ones who often disagreed about the services I described, some thinking they were better than I said, some that I was making excuses for them, but I kept those encounters virtual. That meant the blog still felt like a community, and the comments section was like a nice local pub before dickheads (students, hipsters in search of somewhere ‘authentic’, people who wished it was still the 1970s so they could feel important) came along and ruined it.

So, it was weird when my [Tipping Point](#) post went viral on Twitter. (If not ‘viral’ then far more shares than ever before – over 100.) Tons of people read it – even if they decided to .@ me on Twitter rather than comment here. I got all sorts of responses: anti-trans feminists angry that I’d slagged them off, telling me I was ‘in denial’ of my ‘true sex’ and that I was a ‘self-hating misogynist’; trans activists who said I was too soft on *Time*’s use of the wrong pronouns or ‘othering us’ because I ‘hated myself’ and wanted to be ‘one of them’; trans activists who felt I went too far in criticising *Time*, because I was ‘jealous’ and wanted to be ‘one of them’. Oh, and a few people who actually *liked* it. I didn’t have time to argue with most of them – I went out after posting on Saturday and was just occasionally checking Twitter on my phone – and I didn’t have the heart. (I sometimes think I’m too reluctant to get involved in conflicts, but I can’t remember a single online argument where I regret *not* sticking my oar in. And it drives people *batshit* when they chuck their worst at you and you just ignore them.)

I still checked my emails, though, and one was from BBC Radio Ulster, asking if I could go on their lunchtime talk show to discuss the points in my blog. A junior producer was asking if I’d join a ‘debate’ about the ‘Transgender Tipping Point’ with the host (who, almost certainly, knew very little about it), and a journalist called Janice McAuley, presumably invited for the sake of ‘balance’. (You know, like when they get an academic

who's worked on climate change for thirty years up against some DUP numpty who thinks it's all a scam, probably dreamt up by the ghost of Jim Connolly or some shit like that.) Anyway, for anyone who's *somehow* managed to miss her, McAuley often gets called a 'TERF' (Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminist), which she says is "a slur" even though she calls herself a Radical Feminist and has form for calling trans men 'dupes of the patriarchy' and trans women 'dickless divas', which passes for 'progressive' in the *Belfast Recorder*. (She wishes it was still the 1970s too.)

I wrote back, asking *why* they wanted to put me on with McAuley, saying I was sick of so-called 'debate' that demanded us to justify ourselves instead of talking about any of the issues that actually affect our lives. (Indeed, I told them, *these very debates make our lives harder*.) My email was forwarded to the senior producer, who replied, saying they'd noted our concerns about these sorts of discussions, which had taken place around 'national' (London-based) shows like *Today* and *Newsnight*, and that the host would ensure that the conversation was fair, with people being allowed their opinions without being 'disrespectful' or 'divisive'.

What to do? I don't want to give credence to this sort of 'debate', where our very *being* is held up as something for cis people to decide if it's legit. But if I refuse, then what? McAuley writes a column about how "women-hating trannies" are "censoring" her, she gets asked back to bang on about trans people are "abusive" and we lose even more control over the narrative. I thought it over for a couple of hours, and reluctantly said Yes.

Wednesday, 4 June 2014

Clowns and lion tamers

The trouble with joining the circus is that you're far more likely to become a clown than a lion tamer – and even if you do, people are only watching because, even if they won't admit it, they hope they might see you get eaten.

In case you hadn't guessed, I went on the radio this morning with Pat Donaghy as the host, or ringmaster, and Janice McAuley and I competing for the two main roles. She refused to shake my hand, or even say hello, when we met in the green room, which I think she thought would throw me off somehow. But it just struck me as childish (especially as she's almost twice my age) and not unexpected. Pat seemed friendlier, offering coffee when I arrived and making sure his P.A. looked after me, but his warm greetings struck me as the kind of patter he needs for his job rather than being especially sincere.

If that sounds unfair, the whole conversation was weighted towards McAuley. For one thing, nearly every question went to her first, then to me for a response, when he did nothing to stop her shouting over me. The first one *did* come to me, admittedly, when Pat asked me to explain what the 'tipping point' *was* and what made it so important to the British trans community. I talked about the *Time* spread, and was just getting onto the question of how much 'visibility' improves our everyday lives when Pat interrupted: "How big a difference does this make to people's everyday lives?"

Then, inevitably, it became the Janice McAuley Show. She cut across me: "It sounds like it wouldn't make *any* difference, but it actually makes things worse. Every day, women are being beaten and raped, domestic violence and childcare services are being cut-"

"Nobody said they weren't!"

"No, but you people are constantly insisting that everyone pay attention to you and your rights to go in the Ladies' when women in Northern Ireland *still* can't get an abortion-"

“I was at the pro-choice demo last weekend-”

“I should hope so – you’re a woman!”

“I’m not!”

“Have you got a vagina?” In the moment while I deliberated walking out, she folded her arms. Then, realising this meant nothing on the radio, she said “Q.E.D.”

I tried being ‘nice’, like the commentariat are always telling us to be.

“Pat,” I asked, “can we bring the discussion back to the topic at hand?”

“There you go again, silencing women!”

I just about held it together, but I couldn’t stop Pat falling into her trap. Fearing he was being an arch misogynist by not orienting the whole conversation around McAuley – even though, by her logic, *I* was a woman too – Pat asked if “the trans movement” and “the women’s movement” could work together. And of course, she said No.

“That’s not true!” I replied. “There are decades of work on how sexism and gender stereotypes hurt all of us – on how the right to decide what we do with our bodies is the most important thing for everyone ...”

“I’m afraid that’s all we’ve got time for,” Pat butted in, “as there’s a big Breaking News story in London. Edward, Janice – thank you for your time.”

I thanked him, grudgingly, and left. I looked at my phone and saw the responses to my tweet about going on the show. The first one said: ‘You know the main producer is a TERF, right?’

‘No,’ I responded, ‘but I wish I had.’

Certainly, I won’t be doing it again – if they do read this blog, perhaps they’ll figure out why, but now they’ve covered something they obviously see as Flavour of the Month, I

suspect they won't bother. Perhaps we'd do better to keep out of it entirely than to do something as offensive and stupid as the circus I took part in this morning.

Saturday, 7 June 2014

Somewhere, over the Rainbow ...

Lots (okay, several) people wrote after the last blog asking if I was going to quit writing here. Don't worry, I'm not going to – although I'm still not quite sure who it's for, so when it stops being fun, or at least cathartic, I'll pack it in. It's weird to think back five years, when it seemed like every man and his dog was doing this, and seeing who went into the mainstream, who kept going and who gave up; which sites got taken down and which just stopped getting updated. None of the bloggers I knew have become part of this 'new wave' of trans activist-journalists writing for the *Guardian*, the *New Statesman* or other mainstream 'left-wing' sites, and most of the links on this page are long dead.

Whilst I like having complete control over what I write and publish – far away from those editors who kept telling us that “no-one is interested in trans politics” until a handful of people proved otherwise – I've never seen this as an end in itself, because it's so hard to reach those who need it. But if BBC Radio and its 'debate' isn't for me, perhaps speaking directly to other trans people may be. After the [Tipping Point post](#), I got invited to speak at The Rainbow Project about how the media is hurting us, and what we might do about it. The last time I went, it was dominated by gay men, with only a few lesbians. (One of whom yelled “You're a butch dyke!” when I talked about transition. The others were friendlier, but the damage was done.)

The Project don't have a lot of money (guess why) but there were nice sandwiches, a warm welcome and a few lovely people. I spoke about the McAuley debacle; the endless [transphobic articles in the right-wing press](#) that 'out' people with dead names and old photos, making out that we're all deviants and criminals, just because they think they can get away with it. (Going to the PCC certainly won't do much.) I said they wanted revenge after [Trans Media Watch presented to the Leveson Inquiry](#) about how the tabloids target trans people, and trans children in particular, and that if we wanted to change this, we would have to set up our own blogs and websites, but also that we might have to get our hands dirty and write for 'the enemy'.

To be honest, I was playing devil's advocate a bit, but the audience mostly agreed. (And Sarah, the organiser, said it was the biggest crowd they'd ever had – nearly twenty!) One person came up to me at the end – a cisgender woman and trans ally who I'll call P., who moved back from London for a job at Queen's University in 2010, who's recently got involved with LGBT activism. She said I *had* to keep writing, as she'd never seen a trans man from Northern Ireland on the telly or in the papers, and that as I had a voice, I had to use it. We kept talking – about our shared love of *The Prisoner*, and the weirder teachers we both had at Cliftonville Primary at different times, among other things – over the last few weeks, we've met up quite a lot.

Speaking of primary schools, I've finally landed a job as a mechanic (at a different place to the one P. and I went to). It's only three days a week, and I need more work, but it's a start, the kids are much nicer to me than the ones around Cliftonville and frankly anything is better than the bloody dole. In my spare time, I pitched an article to the *Belfast Herald* site, summarising the things I said in my talk as well as the stupidity of my radio encounter with Janice McAuley, and to my surprise, they commissioned it. (I should say here that the *Guardian* and the *Times* didn't reply to my emails, whilst the *Statesman* said they already had someone covering trans stuff for them.) If you want to read that and support a Northern Irish trans man in the papers, it's [here](#). Hopefully it won't be the last!

Sunday, 20 July 2014

Public health

Sorry for the lack of updates recently. Off the back of [a few *Herald* articles](#), I got invited to a ‘media get-together’ in London. I’d been ambivalent, for reasons familiar to regular readers, and it was only P. who persuaded me to go. (“They’ll listen to you much more once they’ve met you. It shouldn’t be like that, but it is.”)

I went to the venue – this glitzy place near St. Paul’s, everything made of glass, ostentatious sponsors’ logos everywhere, all on the seventh floor with a ‘viewing platform’. I walked around nervously, not knowing anyone. As I got some wine, an older trans woman who I’d read in the *Guardian* asked who I was and what I did. I mentioned my blog and she offered to help with editorial contacts, introducing me to someone from a media advisory group who told me how they were trying to get more trans journos into the mainstream. I didn’t have a card, so I hastily scrawled my email on a bit of paper, and then met some of the trans ‘celebs’ (actors, singers, a younger *Guardian* journalist who seemed diffident and spent the next few minutes going on about the dangers of becoming ‘the trans writer’ when I asked for advice).

Mostly, though, people were interesting, and friendlier than I expected. (“The ‘Londoners are cold’ thing is a myth,” one of them said. “This is the only place I’ve ever found a community.”) After the speeches, about how much progress “we’ve” made in the media, against how much work there still is to do, I got talking to someone who’d worked for NHS London’s Gender Identity Services.

“We’re holding a conference about trans healthcare in different parts of the UK, and we don’t have anyone from Northern Ireland. Can we interest you in talking about your experiences? We can pay your travel and accommodation, and a small fee for your time.”

This would be different from the glittering, self-congratulatory stuff I’ve always hated. It *would* actually allow me to speak truth to power – saying the kinds of things that I don’t even put on here, let alone in the *Herald* with its delightful below-the-line commenters. So, there was no debate, I was going to talk. I managed to get the time off work (even if

they weren't happy about me taking annual leave so soon after I'd started) and got myself over to Imperial College London. (I told them it should be more central – Liverpool, Manchester or Birmingham – but they said London was the easiest place for “everyone” to get to ...)

That aside, I was pleased with how it went. A panel of healthcare professionals introduced the day, talking about the most recent revisions to the WPATH Standards of Care, and especially the need for Clinics to adapt to meet the needs of non-binary people. In general, they agreed, the services should be more user-led, with medics adjusting to the demands of patients rather than the other way around. The explosion of trans visibility in the media had led to far more referrals just as budgets are being slashed, with a political backlash (led by conservatives and TERFs, in tabloids and broadsheets) making it harder for them to access more resources.

Then there were 10-minute speeches from trans people around the country – north and south Wales, East Anglia, the Midlands, the north-east and north-west, the Glasgow area and the rest of Scotland, London and the south-east. I spoke last, getting more nervous as each speaker did their bit. Finally, I told the room about the six years I've spent on the NHS pathway, feeling no closer to bottom surgery than I did in 2008, having clinicians tell me to “be more masculine” or “act butch” before they'd believe that I was a man. There were murmurs of recognition in the crowd, and during the break-out session where groups of us shared our experiences with a facilitator and came up with some points for improvement, I heard a few similar stories.

Feeding everything back directly to the medics and their bosses was incredibly satisfying. None of the ‘think of the children’ concern trolling; no gaslighting; no disingenuous bollocks followed by a refusal to engage with an explanation of *why* it's disingenuous bollocks. No middlemen, no gatekeepers, no need to worry about hostile comments or casual death threats on Twitter. (I didn't dare look at the conference hashtag.) Maybe it's a plausible *alternative* to the ‘debates’, rather than something to run alongside, as I wrote in the *Belfast Herald*. But it seems that if I'm going to keep up this sort of dialogue, or find my way to more people who'll publish my writing, then I'm going to have to do something that I always promised myself (and, more recently, P.) I wouldn't ...

Sunday, 17 August 2014

New horizons ...

No new post for nearly a month, for several reasons. Firstly, I've been busy with work – we're short-staffed so I often find myself there long after I should have gone home. With all the hassle off the Year 6 and 7s near my home, I was worried about working around kids, but so far, it's been fine. I don't have that much contact with the pupils and when I have, it's been fun. I even stepped in the other day to tell a group of lads not to take the piss out of a boy who wanted to play netball with the girls rather than footie with them, and to my surprise, they left him alone, at least while I was around. To be honest, I don't think any of them even *know* my background – while the hormones haven't been quite the adrenalin rush that [Beatriz Preciado describes in *Testo Junkie*](#), they have made a *huge* difference. My chin is covered in stubble, my voice has properly broken, and I've started speech therapy at the Belfast Trust. Actually, the staff have been more of a problem, but it comes out in them being cold or stand-offish rather than openly hostile, so whatever – I've got friends elsewhere.

The extra shifts have meant I've not been volunteering at the Rainbow Project as much as I'd like but I still get there once a week. It's great to see some young trans people – more than I expected – coming to the drop-ins and suggesting books for our library (including the Preciado, which I didn't know about). I wish I'd had that sort of confidence, or that sort of resource, when I was a kid. It's interesting to hear their perspective on the media, too – they're far more switched-on about all that than I was – so P. and I ran a workshop last week about the backlash against the 'tipping point' in the London press, led not by the Tories but by new recruits to the anti-trans feminist cause. (Nothing changes: it's been "trans people aren't real because I say so" for as long as I can remember – but constantly wheeling out Germaine Greer just looks desperate. I can't remember *The Female Eunuch* and I'm pushing forty; one of the cisgender students at the workshop took one look at her columns and said, "Who's *this*?")

There was a heated debate, too, about whether I should write for the *Belfast Herald* (where I'd covered [last month's conference](#), as well as the media stuff). Some of the workshop attendees, who described themselves as trans* allies, brought up some opinion pieces

from the *Herald* on their phones, written by TERFs, DUP councillors, and contrarian bellends from failed Marxist rags, and said the paper was using me as a shield against bigotry. I accepted this, to a point, but told them I hoped that, by writing there, I'll change the minds of some readers and editors who'd never read a little blog like this, and who might eventually stop putting the "free speech" of Janice McAuley and her ilk (who still have the ear of 'left-wing' parties and influence over healthcare) over our safety is a dick move.

And without wanting to look (heaven forbid!) self-important, this kind of writing has results that most people don't see. A couple of young trans guys in the sticks, emailing to say it's been helpful to see someone like them in the paper their parents read. A commissioner from NHS Belfast (the old Primary Care Trust, now a Clinical Commissioning Group) telling me that my points about the 'Real Life Experience' are being taken on board, especially the demand that people be in employment, study or voluntary work at a time when jobs are scarce, university fees are through the roof and voluntary organisations are closing by the dozen, and that doctors' conduct will be reviewed in line with the most recent Standards of Care. Offers of work from the *Guardian*, *New Statesman*, *Huffington Post*, *British Medical Journal* and others.

This won them over to a point – and I think even the most sceptical could see the worth of a mainstream platform, especially when I told them that the *Herald* let me write about almost anything I like, and have hardly interfered with my copy, mostly editing for spelling, grammar and house style. It was the other, bigger publications they worried about – where occasional freelancers had little influence – who also run transphobic think-pieces from a 'progressive' perspective or still print 'journalism' that undermines individuals with dead names and 'before and after' pics, sometimes outing them, and paint us all as con-men or crooks.

But, I said, if I was 'selling out' to all these people, I'd ask for a lot more money. I *am* doing this to try to make a difference, I told them – and P. backed me up – and by the end, I even had a couple of pledges to support me in the comments sections, so I don't feel like I'm fighting so many fires on my own. At this point, I said, it would be easy to say Yes to everything I'm asked to do, be it arguing with idiots on the radio or the telly,

writing a ‘response’ every time some preacher or pundit argues that letting a 5-year-old boy wear a dress will bring the rapture upon us, or being expected to speak for all trans people while making sure I never try to speak for all trans people. But, of course, it wouldn’t make me happy, and probably wouldn’t achieve much other than [perpetuating the circus](#) I described a few weeks ago. The *Herald* feels like a happy middle-ground, at least for now, so I’ll be putting the more political posts there, and this space will go back to doing what it did during the ‘Golden Age’ of blogging – the intimate, the rambling, the weird – whatever wouldn’t fit in the pages, or even the websites, of a newspaper.

Tuesday, 16 September 2014

An open letter to the *Belfast Recorder*

This is the email I sent to the editor of the Belfast Recorder after a piece they ran about me on their website over the weekend. If you want to contact him, the address is bryan.oneill@belfast-recorder.com or letters@belfast-recorder.com. For what little it's worth, the Press Complaints Commission site is [here](#).

Dear Mr. O'Neill,

I am writing in response to the hit-piece your newspaper published about me on Sunday, in the hope – if not the expectation – that you will a) issue a full and proper apology and b) remove it from your website.

The piece misgendered me throughout and revealed both my dead name and clearly identifiable family details, including the implication that my father and I aren't speaking because of my transition. It also used the fact that my older brother (with whom I have long lost touch) had a conviction for assault in 1993 to suggest my entire family, including me, had links to the Ulster Defence Association, which is completely untrue. He was never involved with the UDA, but (as you would hope the editor of a Belfast paper would understand) as we grew up near the Lower Shankill, it was hard to stay away from people who were. His conviction, though, had nothing to do with sectarianism, and to dig up a twenty-year-old story just to smear a relative is the worst kind of gutter journalism.

The article also made me less secure in my job, which I'd only recently started after months of unemployment, by suggesting that having a trans caretaker would be harmful to the pupils at the primary school where I work, and that my voluntary work with the Rainbow Project youth group, as well as my journalism and activism, were somehow part of my 'sinister agenda'. It was brave enough to (mis-)name me, but not the 'staff member' who 'expressed concern' that 'these subjects ... shouldn't be introduced to children'. I *wasn't* 'out' at work – of course I write part-time for the *Belfast Herald*, but I don't imagine the Reception Class kids read that, and I wasn't surprised to see a quote from 'a

parent’ who said ‘I shouldn’t have to be explaining these things to my kids’ supporting the line from one of my apparent colleagues.

The combination of info about my personal and work life made me think that your source was someone who read my blog, but the level of detail could only have come from someone who had met me – most likely via the Rainbow Project. I have my suspicions about your ‘mole’ – I won’t endanger them by outing them, as you did to me, but I want you to know how these actions have made a group of young trans people feel less safe in our space, and might scare them away from the one place in Belfast where they could find any resources or community.

At a time when the media at home and abroad are talking of a ‘Transgender Tipping Point’, and people in the UK (or London, at least) are finally getting to discuss their own experiences on their own terms, it disappoints me that your paper should resort to such old, low tactics to try to undermine someone who is just trying to get on with his own life, and help other people in similar situations to get on with theirs. Dragging my employer into your story was especially harmful, and your use of a quote from my recent BBC appearance with Janice McAuley – who disagrees with your editorial line on just about every other issue – was a nasty surprise.

I have forwarded this letter to my local MP, as well as several trans media activists and LGBT groups, and shared it on Twitter – I hope I can share your response with them soon.

Yours sincerely,

Edward McCreery.

Saturday, 25 October 2014

Dear Laverne ...

My partner, P., said I should write to you. She said I should write to you about happiness, and being happy above all else. Well, maybe not happy, but content, being able to live with myself.

I look at the resolve that you have, to keep fighting in the face of ignorance and malice, to turn the stupid questions and invasions of privacy into sources of inspiration for trans people across the world, and I'm envious. In an admiring, friendly way, but envious nonetheless.

I just can't do it. It's not just the hit-job in the *Belfast Recorder*, or their inability to apologise, or acknowledge they might have something to apologise for, even though the piece was quietly removed after [my open letter to their editor](#) went viral. (It's still cached: I'm not sure whether to keep pressing or leave it in the hope that people forget, but I won't bore you with that.)

I expected that, like you must expect shit from CNN or NBC, let alone Fox News. P. was brilliant, hiding my smartphone when I couldn't stop myself from looking at the article again, telling me how the people who know and love me would be supportive. My friends at the Rainbow Project LGBT group were also great, putting a statement of support on Twitter and giving advice on how to talk to my boss.

My employers, FWIW, were about as good as I expected – they said they backed me, but the 'source' used for the *Recorder* article was "entitled to his or her opinion" provided they didn't discriminate against me at work. It would be counter-productive to drag things out by searching for whoever it was, they said, and I agreed, although I think for different reasons. A few kids have been a bit off with me – probably something their parents said – but I guess it'll pass.

It won't be so easy to tell the bigger lads not to bully the smaller ones for wanting to play with the girls, sadly, but the press has decided that little kids who don't feel comfortable

with their assigned gender are the biggest threat to world peace right now, and who am I to stop them?

I tried, I really did. After the *Recorder* published all they could find about my past and tried to put me out of my job, I wrote a [response in the Belfast Herald](#), building on points in [my blog](#) about the specific efforts to hurt me, and how such tactics have been used against us for the last sixty years or more, even since [Christine Jorgensen was splashed across the world's papers](#) with before-and-after photos and 'sensational' revelations about her life.

I was grateful for the platform – I'm always grateful for any platform. Maybe that feeling never goes away, because we're taught to associate being trans with not being successful. Some of the comments were quite encouraging – especially the one from my dad, who posted under his real name with four little words that meant so much to me: *This really isn't fair*. Perhaps he'll get back in touch – perhaps not.

But he won't be doing it through the *Herald* comments section, as I've quit my (badly, slowly paid) slot. After my last post for them went online, they commissioned two responses. One was the usual concern trolling from a woman in the Democratic Ulster Party. Again, I could cope with that. The other was from someone called Janice McAuley, who probably hasn't made it across the Atlantic, but her ideas are all drawn from American transphobic feminists from the 1970s, and you'll have heard them all before, so there's no need.

The two pieces were almost identical when they talked about how children are too young to know their gender (if they're not cis, anyway) but McAuley used her national paper column to talk about how the 'trans thought-police' are 'silencing' her. (If you put 'Janice McAuley' into the *Herald* website's search box, it comes back with 'about 700 results'.) She said the same thing on a BBC Radio phone-in the next day, and it's tiresome to know that whatever happens, people like that will find the energy to keep up the 'debate' (and the pretence that "I say you shouldn't exist" is a fair starting-point for 'a conversation').

But, as you know, these people wouldn't dominate 'the debate' unless someone let them. I wanted to reply to McAuley, but my editor said that "everyone has had their say" and that they and "our readers" felt it "time to move on" – before publishing another McAuley piece the next week. It was on abortion rights; I agreed with pretty much all of it, but there was another piece the week after, about how the [Equality Act \(2010\)](#) was right not to let trans women into rape crisis centres, and some more tweets about how you were 'a misogynist' for appearing on the front of *Time* in a red dress and heels. She'll generate far more advertising revenue for them, I guess: hate makes clicks, and that's all that matters.

I think I've found my tipping point – it's just a shame that it feels like I'm falling backwards rather than forwards. Although, as P. told me this morning, it's not that I've given up, just that I've found the places where I can be most productive.

I'm going to keep doing healthcare activism – at conferences, where I know my audience will be people who are there to listen and learn, in a position to do something constructive.

I'm going to keep volunteering. I might not want to keep up the media fight, but I'll encourage younger people who do. Over time, anyone who puts their head over the parapet won't feel so alone, or burn out so quickly. Of course, I'll support anyone who *doesn't* want to, but just wants to *live*, quietly and gently. The two things are linked, as I know you know. I don't know if you'll read this, but if you do, I hope you understand my decision. I think you will.

Yours in love, respect and admiration,

Edward McCreery.

PS: For my other readers (as this is for Laverne, but you as well), I'm not going to stop writing. In fact, I'm going to try to go back to the golden age of blogging, before it became a stepping-stone into the mainstream media, or an outlet for embittered, failed columnists. It'll just be a hobby, and it'll just be about my favourite subject – [Formula 1](#). If you want

to talk to me about trans stuff, there's always [Twitter](#), but better still, there's always the Rainbow Project. I hope we get to meet again there ...

Tipping Point: Buying in, or selling out?

The catalyst for my final short story is *Time* magazine's cover of May 2014, with *Orange is the New Black* actor Laverne Cox under the headline 'Transgender Tipping Point' and the sub-heading 'America's next civil rights frontier'.¹⁷⁴ Even more than *Crossing*, *Tipping Point* draws on my own experience: my time spent writing about trans issues, at first combining autobiographical material with lessons from trans theorists in the hope that a 'transition' narrative would provide an accessible hook for issues around trans politics, history and culture; and then more directly about the political issues facing our community, for the *Guardian*, the *New Statesman* and other outlets from 2010 to 2014 (at which point I quit, burnt out, and decided to do this PhD instead). Its key themes are the relationship between old, 'mainstream' media and new forms that came with the internet – forums and social media, but primarily blogging, by this point incorporated into 'legacy' media websites – and the opportunities they provided for trans writers to change the terms of the discourse, and the compromises this entailed. More than any other story, *Tipping Point* felt like writing 'live' history, as I reprised my recent work with a view to illuminating the present, showing how and why the conversation about potential reforms to the Gender Recognition Act (on which, at the time of writing, public consultation has just closed) had become so toxic – and the exhausting effect this had had on trans people struggling for better laws and a more sympathetic society.

I discussed my own time in journalism extensively in *Trans: A Memoir*. The first half of that book described how I learned about trans people from media that (largely) excluded trans voices; the second half documented my efforts to change it, and my place within a new wave of British trans writers who also worked in mainstream journalism (and who had honed their internet writing skills on early 2000s platforms such as Livejournal or Blogger). Again, the memoir form imposed limits, not just in terms of *whose* story I could tell, but also in how explicit I could be in criticising editors who commissioned me, publications that printed my work and journalists who responded to it – attacking them too openly, however exasperated I was with them, would likely mean losing not just income, but my platform to counter their ongoing transphobia. As it was for Feinberg, fiction could be a way around this problem: making up people and publications would allow me to criticise the structures in which my contemporaries and I worked, rather than

the people and publications we worked *with*. (As such, fiction may offer be a way to *build* bridges, but its plausible deniability means that in this case, it was not guaranteed to burn them in a way that naming people in my memoir would.)

In the early 2010s, the writing that most excited me was the ‘autofiction’ mentioned in my introduction to this essay – indeed, I got Sheila Heti to interview me for the epilogue to *Trans: A Memoir*.¹⁷⁵ However, I decided not to imitate Feinberg in creating a thinly fictionalised version for *Tipping Point*. As with *Crossing*, it seemed more productive to investigate life beyond the capital, where Britain’s media remains concentrated (and where I moved in 2011 to further my career). Having broken into the *Guardian* whilst still living in Brighton, and having spent all this period on Twitter, I often interacted with people in other parts of the UK who felt that the country’s trans community was too London-centric, with most activist meetings taking place there, and media work focusing almost entirely on institutions based there. The advent of the internet, particularly YouTube and social media, made it easier for the previously disparate British trans community to talk to each other, but the problem of physical distance was not overcome. Considering this, I decided it would be more interesting to set the story in one of the UK’s furthest major cities from London, and one whose history has been more adversely affected by decisions taken at Westminster than almost any other – Belfast.

The story takes place when the Troubles are a memory, nearly twenty years after the Good Friday Agreement, and austerity has replaced the War on Terror as the UK’s dominant political issue. The protagonist, Ed, is a trans man in his mid-thirties who still lives where he grew up, near Belfast’s notoriously Loyalist/Protestant Lower Shankill estate. Like many trans people, he keeps a blog, which was originally about a range of interests including Formula 1 and *Doctor Who*. However, in response to reader feedback, it evolved into a chronicle of his gender reassignment, focusing on the positives of getting his testosterone prescription and the frustrations of transitioning via the NHS while unemployed or precariously employed.

Like the performance art scene in *Crossing*, blogging became popular with trans people in part due to its low costs of entry – a computer and an internet connection – and partly because it allowed people to respond to exclusion from mainstream media on their own

terms. And like the performance art scene, it allowed trans people to place their personal experiences within wider contexts without tying them to the traditional memoir form, given that it did not have to follow any narrative structure or be subjected to any editorial framing. Indeed, in *Tipping Point*'s first paragraph, written in a conversational style typical of early 21st century blogs and social media (and in certain North American novels and stories by trans writers, explored in the Conclusion below), Ed uses his direct line to the reader to complain: 'all we ever hear about [*in the media*] is people 'telling their stories', which are always about their personal journeys and never about housing, unemployment or healthcare'.¹⁷⁶ Ed's tactic in using autobiographical writing in pursuit of trans equality is to infuse his experiences with critiques of the media, and with empirical data about transphobia collected by 21st century LGBT organisations (but not Stonewall, who did not include trans people in their campaigning until 2015). This activism addressed a problem extant since the Victorian era and explored in *A Night at the Theatre* – institutions do not have any data on trans people or their political concerns, and thus dismiss claims of discrimination due to lack of evidence, and claim such issues (or, in the 19th century, such *people*) did not exist at all.

The crucial difference between *Crossing*'s performances and *Tipping Point*'s blogging is that whilst the NuQueer Power collective repudiate mainstream culture (with limited success), Ed tries to change the media from within, after his response to *Time*'s article goes viral on Twitter and propels him into the mainstream, where he struggles to avoid being sucked into unwinnable arguments held on cisgender people's (fundamentally transphobic) terms. (It's also notable that in *Crossing*, the group's online presence is a means to 'IRL' organisation; here, the virtual interactions that Ed's blog facilitates *are* his community.) Although trans theory has helped to create a market for Ed's writing, he does not particularly need trans theory for his blogging or journalism, as he has internalised many of its ideas third-hand from other trans people (and, without realising it, he is essentially following Stone's 'post-transsexual' imperative). The only explicit reference to it comes near the story's end, when a younger trans man recommends Paul B. Preciado's *Testo Junkie* (published in Spanish in 2008 and translated into English in 2013) to him.¹⁷⁷ The fact that journalism, while incorporating aspects of memoir and theory, can be done without a solid grounding in either, suggests that at last, a wider range

of forms can be useful for trans people – and that the gatekeepers who have traditionally kept trans people out of the associated industries can be circumvented.

Ed's response to *Time* encapsulates the reactive nature of certain media activist work of the early 2010s: a mainstream outlet finally notices the community's improved organisation and increasing self-confidence and covers it as if being trans is new *in itself*, whilst reiterating old tropes and doing things that trans activists have agreed to be bad practice. He singles out the *Time* reporter's othering of 'men in deep V-necks and necklaces' and 'women with crew cuts and plaid shirts', like they were writing a follow-up to *Lola* by The Kinks', presumably done in pursuit of 'journalistic 'colour''.¹⁷⁸ This sense of bafflement at trans people's gender presentations looks worse after the article dead-names Christine Jorgensen and some living interviewees; Ed also objects to the amount of airtime given to US Republican transphobia, providing the first indication of how liberals' ideological commitments to hearing both sides, and 'freedom of speech' (without any consideration of whether the playing field is level) intersects with right-wing mendacity, although he notes gleefully that 'they ignored the anti-trans 'feminists' entirely – for once.'¹⁷⁹ I wrote in a *New Statesman* blogpost in March 2013 that by then, most commentators had grudgingly accepted the right of individual adults to transition, as the ever-growing numbers of self-defining people suggested that certain second-wave feminists' 'false consciousness' arguments weren't working – and that, consequently, transphobic pundits were trying to monster the community, and shift the focus onto gender-variant children.¹⁸⁰ Ed is most annoyed by *Time*'s implication that hormone replacement therapy and hormone blockers (to delay puberty) have the same effect, when 'the former leads to permanent physical changes' while 'the latter stalls them'. He laments that 'this sort of misinformation could have big repercussions for our healthcare', aware that as trans people become more visible, gaps in public knowledge become more obvious, with aggressive transphobes using their platforms to create a 'received wisdom' that will be difficult (and draining) to displace.¹⁸¹

Ed is careful to praise the piece, where it's due, and this generosity contributes to his post on his (previously obscure) blog going viral. He is quite forgiving towards the journalistic 'colour' mentioned above, which he sees as 'kind-spirited, which is more than you say for most of this stuff', but his main point is that Laverne Cox's skill in countering received

ideas in a warm, accessible way allows her to stretch the limits of what is allowed within mainstream discourse. He admires Cox's forthright insistence that 'There's not just one trans story, there's not just one trans experience', and is grateful for her discussion of 'being taught ... to associate being trans with *not* being successful'.¹⁸² Despite his keenness to contradict the narrative that to be trans is to consign oneself to professional failure, Ed eventually opts out of journalism and focuses on local activism, wanting to build a stronger community in austerity-ravaged Belfast, and go back to writing about his diverse range of interests (especially Formula 1) rather than spend his time justifying his existence to transphobic commentators.¹⁸³

This conclusion signifies that *Time's* 'tipping point' was not part of a narrative of unfolding progress, but a relative high point in the historically strained relationship between trans people and the media, in which each generation must fight the same battles. In the UK, happening alongside the appearance of trans voices in UK liberal newspapers and TV/radio programmes and the Memorandum of Understanding that Trans Media Watch (TMW) reached with Channel 4 and other media outlets were TMW's submission to the Leveson Inquiry into journalistic corruption in 2012, which detailed press harassment of trans individuals and demonisation of the wider community, and then the suicide of trans teacher Lucy Meadows in 2013 after the *Daily Mail* newspaper ran a high-profile column attacking her. As Jane Fae points out in *Trans Britain*, since the 'Tipping Point', 'some journalists have become ... more overtly dedicated to undermining trans people', creating 'a significant and concerted rise in anti-trans sentiment.'¹⁸⁴ Fae argues that this backlash against trans visibility and rights was far more co-ordinated than the 'opportunity-led' coverage of Jorgensen, Ashley and others in the post-war period,¹⁸⁵ and it led me to drop out of mainstream journalism. Unlike Ed in *Tipping Point*, who retracts from the public eye entirely, I decided instead that it was time for me – and other trans authors – to try a completely different type of writing, that moved beyond the memoir/theory dichotomy.

CONCLUSION: Fiction, memoir and theory after the ‘tipping point’

I started this PhD in September 2015, in the same week that *Trans: A Memoir* was published. At that point, planning the project, I was thinking about how much had changed since my first attempt at writing this collection of stories, between 2003 and 2007. Those changes, in my own creative development and in the wider community are extensively documented in this thesis – but the last three years have been unusually turbulent not just for trans people, but also for the Anglo-American political order. My first year began with Jeremy Corbyn, a radical socialist, defying long odds to become leader of the Labour Party and ended with the UK voting to leave the European Union; my second took in Donald Trump’s victory in the US and a British election where Labour performed far above expectations, challenging the horizon of political possibility. My third has, in the UK at least, been characterised by a sense of stasis rather than stability, as Brexit has developed into an all-encompassing political stalemate; globally, the ongoing collapse of ‘third way’ liberal/centrist politics and the rise of the far-right has brought a backlash against LGBTQI+ advances – such as the election of ‘proud homophobe’ and fascist Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, or Viktor Orbán banning Gender Studies from Hungarian universities. In the UK, it remains fashionable for businesses and even far-right parties to pay lip service to LGBTQI+ inclusion, with left-wing activists expressing anxieties about Pride in particular being appropriated by conservative interests, whilst cuts to the NHS, mental health services and unemployment services all had disastrous effects on the trans community.¹⁸⁶

I believed in 2015 that an audience existed for these stories, after the work that trans authors and activists had done to create it over the preceding decades – and I still do. I also still feel I was right to move away from the type of activism-journalism I did between 2010 and 2014, combining memoir and theory like Ed in *Tipping Point*. I had nothing more to say in that format after *Trans: A Memoir*, which covered my entire adult life to 2014 – when my already-fragile faith that increased mainstream media representation would lead to improvements in political rights and social acceptance was seriously wavering. *Time*’s ‘tipping point’ article and the appearance of (Trump-supporting) reality TV star Caitlyn Jenner on *Vanity Fair*’s cover in June 2015, as well as the growing visibility of UK trans writers and artists, their increased acceptance in feminist circles and

demands for improved legal rights prompted a UK media backlash. Its roots are explored in *Tipping Point* but in the year since November 2017, when I completed that story, things have become much worse. Consultations around changes to the Gender Recognition Act prompted a wave of transphobic op-eds in centrist publications, in which trans people were regularly accused of stifling ‘debate’ about our existences, which took place over our heads as the voices who broke into the mainstream before 2015 were sidelined or withdrew in frustration. This culminated in a *Guardian* editorial that claimed to recognise both sides of what trans activist Jules Joanne Gleeson characterised as a ‘toxic debate’ in which ‘trans women and cis women [are] pitted directly against each other’ but drew ‘primarily on the framing and talking-points presented by the anti-transgender extreme’ and its media representatives.¹⁸⁷ Remarkably, the piece provoked a response from *The Guardian*’s US team, who called it ‘misplaced and misguided’, and representative of ‘an alarming intolerance of trans viewpoints in mainstream UK discourse’.¹⁸⁸

In the US, Trump’s government attempted to ban trans people from serving in the military (presumably in response to the attention paid to Chelsea Manning, recently released after being imprisoned for her work with Wikileaks), and considered ‘creating a narrow definition of gender as being only male or female and unchangeable once determined at birth’.¹⁸⁹ I felt like the tactic of using autobiographical testimony to produce greater public understanding, bring trans voices into mainstream spaces and alter the terms of discussion had failed – I certainly wasn’t capable of achieving such things on my own, or even with substantive community support. Even with my entrenched pessimism about the possibilities for permanent, progressive change, I had not anticipated how fiercely the media and political establishment would double down in the face of such a challenge. I was not personally capable of repeating such a tactic, and the wider community will have to become more organised, and even more vocal about its political needs, including its need for publishing platforms as big as those used by our enemies.

This is not to say that life narratives are no longer useful. After all, like the 1990s trans theorists in their foundational texts, I have found myself going back to personal experiences throughout this paper, to lend concrete authority to my reflections on gender-variant living, and to explain how I drew from them for my stories – even those that were not based partly on my own life. In fact, with conversations between trans people about

rights and representation being more prominent than ever before, in the face of the backlash against trans rights, the stakes for our conversations have become higher than at any other moment: the questions of whose stories get told, and where and *how*, remain relevant. As Nancy Miller put it, memoirs provide authors and readers with democratic access to minority experiences; her argument that they can help individuals and communities to (re-)assert their agency is just as valid as ever.¹⁹⁰ At the time of writing, there is fierce discussion on Twitter about how transphobes may use Andrea Long Chu's recent op-ed for the *New York Times*, entitled 'My New Vagina Won't Make Me Happy'. Here, Chu admits feeling 'demonstrably worse' since starting on oestrogen, and expresses considerable doubt about the ability of the reassignment process to improve her mental wellbeing in a way that many trans people on Twitter and elsewhere feared could be used to justify the denial of medical treatment for transsexual people, at a time when Trump's government were talking about doing exactly that.¹⁹¹ Doubtless, by the time you read this, the online 'community' will likely be concerned about something similar, but different. (I should also record here that Chu wrote the best piece I read on *Trans: A Memoir*, for *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, founded by Susan Stryker and Paisley Currah in 2014, which has provided a welcome expansion to the possibilities open for trans writers.¹⁹²)

As I found in my previous career, and as I explored in *Tipping Point*, blogging and journalism can be, as forms of activism, quite reactive – indeed, this reactivity is structured into the op-ed form, existing as it does to respond to current news and the discourse(s) around it. Like theory, fiction can be more *proactive*, allowing space for writers to articulate trans subjectivities and address social issues that can seldom be found in mainstream media, despite the appearance of more long-form online writing as a counter to 'clickbait' or journalism aimed at people short on time and attention. Increasingly, something like my 30-article *Transgender Journey* series, with its refusal of social media-friendly swift gratification, looks like a one-off. In her review of the book that came out of my series, Cat Fitzpatrick wrote that *Trans* 'may well do a lot to further the conversations cis people have about trans people, but it can do little to further our conversations with each other' and that it will 'only [*be*] when we control the means of distribution that we are able to get writing published that is not just by us but actually for us'.¹⁹³ The implication, given that Fitzpatrick is an editor at Topside Press, set up to publish fiction by trans authors, is that while transition memoirs 'have to proceed in a

way that takes cis people's assumptions and desires as the horizon of possibility', fictional forms did not.¹⁹⁴ I took issue with this characterisation of memoir – my book was aimed as much at people who had not yet, or were just starting to realise their trans identity, and wanted a guide through the transition process and the dizzying array of available resources, as it was at cis people who wanted to understand trans people and politics. To me, it seemed impossible to tell if my readers would be trans or not – and not the main issue. Why not try to make cis readers see the world through a trans person's eyes? Even if you accept that transition memoirs had been oriented around fitting trans experiences into cisnormative social structures, I did not feel that such narratives were *structurally* unable to do this.

As I moved away from memoir, having explored its capacity for conveying trans experiences to what I felt was its limit, Fitzpatrick's positing of *fiction* as the form 'for us' intrigued me, given that since the early 1990s, *theory* had become the most popular mode for trans people to convey not just their experiences but also their political concerns. By 2015, I argued, the memoir-theory opposition had broken down – but what of this new dichotomy? The two Topside books I read – Imogen Binnie's *Nevada* (2013) and *A Safe Girl to Love* by Casey Plett (2014) – did not follow *Stone Butch Blues* in deliberately blurring the boundary between protagonist and author, and I wondered if that novel's auto-fictional grey area could be as useful to contemporary trans writers as it was to Feinberg. As discussed earlier in this paper, I decided against using this tactic for *Trans: A Memoir* and did not see any compelling reason to employ it in any of my short stories – the historical material could be illustrated better by inventing new characters, even for the stories that overlapped directly with my times. However, I never conceived this project as being aimed only, or even primarily at trans readers. Sure, trans readers – especially younger ones – may appreciate a sense of being represented in literary culture and, hopefully, identify with the experiences and emotions that my characters portray. But social media, and events where I read my work in public, have shown me that my audience is not *just* trans people: for all the aggressiveness and assertiveness of the anti-trans feminists and reactionary right, there are many cisgender people – perhaps more female than male, often but not always part of a resurgent political left – who are sympathetic to trans issues and see fiction as a useful path towards understanding them.

A shift to fiction becoming the *dominant* mode might constitute a ‘third wave’ of trans writing, although that does not mean memoir or theory will cease to be useful, or should be abandoned. *Can* fiction offer another way towards the establishment of a ‘transgendered writing style’ that Bornstein hoped would ‘produce an identification with a transgendered experience’?¹⁹⁵ Binnie and Plett’s works differ from the few 20th century novels to feature a transgender protagonist, such as LeRoy’s *Sarah* or *Cobra* (1972) by Cuban author Severo Sarduy, an inventive fantasy in which a male-to-female transvestite aims to transform his/her body via a series of quests and rituals. (I enjoyed *Cobra* and *Sarah*, and both, but especially Sarduy, helped shape this project.) Unlike those works, which never seriously attempt to depict the realities of cross-gender living, *Nevada* and *A Safe Girl to Love* are set in an identifiable present-day North America, with their characters rooted in concerns not just about transphobia, but also employment, families, friends and relationships. Both are written in a conversational, anecdotal style that will be familiar to anyone immersed in trans discourses on Twitter or, before that, Livejournal and other blogging platforms. Often, their narrators make asides that trans readers will identify with, making it obvious that like *Stone Butch Blues*, these books draw heavily on their authors’ lived experience. Plett’s volume of short stories illustrates contemporary social challenges for trans women; like mine, it uses a range of settings, characters and forms. One story, ‘Twenty Hot Tips for Shopping Success’, advises those who are not ‘out’ on how to handle the self-doubt and suspicious comments that come with buying women’s clothes. The way its narrator finds both absurd humour and exasperation here was familiar to me: a vignette such as ‘Devise short yet complex stories in case someone asks you why you’re trying on women’s clothes. Enjoy this step. Be creative’ followed by ‘Weigh the ludicrousness of these statements’¹⁹⁶ reminded me not just of my own anxiety-ridden retail trips in my late teens, but also of the tone I tried to strike when discussing them in my stories, especially more conversational first-person ones such as *Dancing with the Devil*, *Never Going Underground* and *Tipping Point*.

Binnie’s *Nevada* is a novel that uses the (often, but by no means always male) American road-trip genre to explore a young trans woman’s relationship difficulties, including her issues with intimacy, caused by her gender dysphoria, as well as her girlfriend’s apparent infidelity. Its narrator, Maria, is brutally honest in a way that feels like part of a community conversation, rather than being for outsiders – her admission that ‘I totally

fucking hate everybody else who's trans, and I don't want to deal with it' would likely cause uproar if it were published by a writer like myself in the *Guardian*, or Andrea Long Chu in the *New York Times*, but here, it is contextualised within a nuanced examination of a life.¹⁹⁷ The novel form also provides scope for Maria's internalised transphobia to be challenged, when she meets James, who presents as male but is struggling with gender dysphoria, and she has to explain how she worked her way through harmful social stereotypes and 'scientific' theories about trans people (especially trans women). This raises the possibility of a 'Bechdel test' for trans fiction, modelled on 'The Rule' in Alison Bechdel's 1985 comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For*, in which two female characters agree to only watch films that feature at least two women, who talk to each other, about something besides a man.¹⁹⁸ Such a test would demand that trans fiction includes at least two gender-variant characters, who talk to each other, about something besides their own identities or the mechanics of transition; it would demand that they discuss the wider social issues for trans people, or something else entirely, undermining the stereotype that we think about nothing besides our own bodies. All my stories included here pass this test – except *Reconfiguration*, which aims to show how trans identities were, after their medicalisation, codified by outsiders.

So far, trans fiction by trans authors has, like trans theory, been mostly North American: of the eleven authors featured in the recent *Paris Review* article, 'Toward Creating a Trans Literary Canon', all but one were from the US or Canada.¹⁹⁹ In the UK, trans and non-binary people are becoming prominent in poetry – not just through Kaveney's neo-classical verses, but also via *avant-gardists* such as Nat Raha and Verity Spott, or Ted Hughes Award winner Jay Bernard – and performance art, with Travis Alabanza emerging as a leading light. At present there is little sign of a British trans fiction movement (even the main exception, *Tiny Pieces of Skull* by Roz Kaveney, cut between London and Chicago) with long-form prose writers trying to catch up with the North American 'second wave' with histories such as *Trans Britain* (2018), edited by Christine Burns, and theoretical works such as CN Lester's *Trans Like Me* (2017) or E. J. Gonzalez-Polledo's *Transitioning: Matter, Gender, Thought* (2017).

Can, and *should* British trans fiction differ from its North American predecessors not just in content but also in form? Binnie and Plett's 'anecdotal realism', written in registers

that recall early 21st century trans blogs and autobiographical journalism, offer a starting point, and there is no reason why UK-based trans authors should (or could) not employ similar modes. After all, many of the current domestic wave maintained blogs, have been vocal on social media and written for the websites of prominent newspapers, magazines and publishers – so it would make sense for them to use the conversational style of blogs and the direct addresses to readers characteristic of Twitter and Tumblr posts, and the intelligent but uncomplicated prose style necessary for mainstream journalism, where we have tried to convey the complexities of our lives to an interested but (usually) uninitiated audience. (All these authors, including me, remain engaged with developments in North American trans writing, and given the UK's close cultural relationship with the US and Canada, this is unlikely to change for the next generation.)

Such naturalistic fiction is certainly useful in our present moment, with our visibility, but not our social acceptance or legal rights secured: it can communicate the various ways in which transphobia functions without being tied to the facts of its authors' lives like memoir, or directed largely towards an audience already familiar with its fundamental concerns like theory. It can also consolidate our understanding of the different histories of trans people in differing parts of the UK at different times: it has been as important to me here to explore Manchester and Belfast, and the effects of the Criminal Law Amendment Act and Section 28, as it has the relative merits of private diaries, memoir, oral history, film, performance and bloggings as adequate means of conveying our experiences. The positive critical reception recently given to Jordy Rosenberg's novel *Confessions of the Fox* (2018), which imagines 18th century jail-breaker and folk hero Jack Sheppard as a trans man (hiding his history like Phoebe Hessel or James Miranda Barry, both referenced in my stories), and is narrated by a trans academic, suggests that such use of historical fiction may, at this point, be productive for trans writers and readers. (It's also interesting to note that Rosenberg, based in Massachusetts, focuses on a British figure – perhaps a sign that the UK's trans writers might find it useful to explore their country's history more.) Over time, as the trans literary canon becomes more secure and its writers more confident, and less concerned with the individual author (or their characters) being taken as representative of the entire community, we may see trans writers employing a wider range of genres, or even making new ones as the social conditions in which they operate evolve.

As my stories have hopefully shown, trans experiences can be expressed via a wide range of forms, even if I have not ventured into fantasy, surrealism or science fiction – all of which have the potential to will imaginary worlds into being, in which gender identities are expressed differently, or differences have ceased to exist. Such work has the potential to change trans identities, in the here and now, by presenting alternative realities to which people can aspire; historical fiction such as mine can challenge preconceptions about trans people only having existed since they found their own terms and forms to detail their experiences, and make its readers think more deeply about how a cisnormative society has shaped those terms and forms. My stories have aimed to suggest how the proliferation of different literary genres, modes of writing and modes of cultural expression, from the popular press of the early 19th century to the blogs and social media of the early 21st, have shaped the ways in which trans people have understood and presented themselves; I have also tried to engage creatively with ways in which trans people tried to commandeer these forms, or generate their own, to take back control of their own narratives and help to create a gender-variant community. In the three decades since Stone, Bornstein, Feinberg and others began to publish their foundational works, the ability of trans and non-binary people to reconceive gender, and reshape the language of gender, has proved extraordinary, leading to the invention of theory and the reinvention of memoir. Now, I feel that the potential for fiction to represent, and *reinvent*, the trans community is infinite: as Mikhail Bakhtin put it, ‘the wealth and diversity of speech genres are boundless because the various possibilities of human activity are inexhaustible’.²⁰⁰ Or, to put it another way – there could be as many literary ‘variations’ as there are trans people.

¹ Stone, S. (1991) ‘The *Empire* Strikes Back: A Post-Transsexual Manifesto’. In: Stryker, S. and Whittle, S. (eds.) (2006) *The Transgender Studies Reader*. New York: Routledge, p231.

² Steinmetz, K. (2014) ‘The Transgender Tipping Point’. *Time*, 29 May. Available at: <http://time.com/135480/transgender-tipping-point/>. (Accessed: 30 October 2018.)

³ Stone, p227.

⁴ Bornstein, K. (1995) *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Woman and the Rest of Us*. New York: Vintage, p4.

⁵ Prosser, J. (1998) *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*. New York: Columbia University Press, p192. I use ‘ze’ and ‘hir’ as Feinberg’s self-determined, gender-neutral pronouns.

⁶ Stone, p231.

⁷ Feinberg, L. (1996) *Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to Dennis Rodman*. Boston: Beacon Press, pX.

⁸ Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw*, pp12-13.

⁹ Bindel, J. (2004) ‘Gender Benders, Beware’. *The Guardian*, 31 January. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2004/jan/31/gender.weekend7>. (Accessed: 30 October 2018.)

¹⁰ Riddell, C. (1980) ‘Divided Sisterhood’. In: Stryker and Whittle (eds.), p158.

¹¹ All of these were published between 1997 (when Semiotext(e) first issued Kraus’ *I Love Dick*) and 2013.

¹² Jacques, J. (2015) *Trans: A Memoir*. London/New York: Verso, p299.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p309.

¹⁴ Moore, S. (1994) ‘Make way for the third sex’. *The Guardian*, 13 October, pA5.

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- ¹⁵ Stryker, S. (2008) *Transgender History*. Berkeley: Seal Press, p33.
- ¹⁶ Ibid.
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- ¹⁸ Ibid.
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- ²⁰ Ibid.
- ²¹ Cocks, p99.
- ²² Jacques, *Trans*, p74.
- ²³ Jacques, J. (2018) 'A Night at the Theatre' in *Variations: Transgender Memoir, Theory and Fiction*. PhD thesis: University of Sussex, unpublished, p25.
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- ²⁷ Ibid.
- ²⁸ Jacques, 'A Night at the Theatre', p25.
- ²⁹ Ibid., p30.
- ³⁰ Anon. (1863) 'Worship-street: Quite the lady'. *The Standard*, 8 July, p7.
- ³¹ Jacques, 'A Night at the Theatre', p21.
- ³² Ibid, p22.
- ³³ Anon. (1854) 'Guildhall.' *The Times*, 1 August, p12.
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- ³⁵ Anon. (1871) *The Trial of Boulton and Park, with Hurt and Fiske: A Complete and Accurate Report of the Proceedings Extending Over Six Days*. Manchester: John Heywood, p56.
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- ³⁸ Anon. (1870) 'The Charge of Personating Women.' *The Times*, 7 May, p11.
- ³⁹ Zagria (2010) 'Alfred Taylor (1862 – ?) aristocrat, procurer, waiter'. *A Gender Variance Who's Who*, 14 January. Available at: <https://zagria.blogspot.com/2010/01/alfred-taylor-1862-aristocrat-procurer.html>. (Accessed: 23 August 2018.)
- ⁴⁰ Jacques, J. (2018) 'A Wo/Man of No Importance' in *Variations: Transgender Memoir, Theory and Fiction*. PhD thesis: University of Sussex, unpublished, p39.
- ⁴¹ Ibid.
- ⁴² Ibid.
- ⁴³ Ibid., p41.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid., p43.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid., p40.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid., p44.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid., p44.
- ⁴⁹ Anon., *The Trial of Boulton and Park*, p55.
- ⁵⁰ Cocks, p72.
- ⁵¹ Jacques, 'A Wo/Man of No Importance', p51.
- ⁵² Ibid., p51.
- ⁵³ Grosskurth, P. (1980) *Havelock Ellis: A Biography*. London: Allen Lane, p185.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵⁵ Ibid., p188.
- ⁵⁶ An anarchist organisation devoted to free love and an end to children being called illegitimate.
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- ⁶² Jacques, 'A Wo/Man of No Importance', p41.
- ⁶³ Prosser, pp135-136.
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- ⁶⁵ Ibid., p140.
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