



## Forms of Resistance: Uses of Memoir, Theory, and Fiction in Trans Life Writing

Juliet Jacques

To cite this article: Juliet Jacques (2017) Forms of Resistance: Uses of Memoir, Theory, and Fiction in Trans Life Writing, *Life Writing*, 14:3, 357-370, DOI: [10.1080/14484528.2017.1328301](https://doi.org/10.1080/14484528.2017.1328301)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14484528.2017.1328301>



Published online: 05 Jul 2017.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 651



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 1 View citing articles [↗](#)



## Forms of Resistance: Uses of Memoir, Theory, and Fiction in Trans Life Writing

Juliet Jacques

Creative and Critical Writing, University of Sussex, Brighton, UK

### ABSTRACT

This article examines the forms of writing that transgender (hereafter ‘trans’) people in North America, the United Kingdom and Australia have used to convey their experiences to a wider public, since the first sex reassignment surgeries were performed during the inter-war period. I will discuss how transsexual people first used memoir to counter sensationalistic mass media coverage, and then how feminist critiques of their works led to ‘post-transsexual’ theory, which deconstructed the conventions and clichés that the transition memoir genre had developed. These theorists suggested new ways to document gender-variant lives beyond a generalised desire for public acceptance and in response to social concerns: the policies of the gender identity clinics, who decided who could access medical services, and on what terms, especially the demand that patients ‘pass’ in their acquired genders and hide their histories; and the exclusion of trans people from feminist spaces, and gay/lesbian politics. The article concludes with a consideration of my own autobiographical writing, in a newspaper blog and a memoir, and how my practice responded to and attempted to change how trans people were expected to write about their lives.

### KEYWORDS

Trans life writing;  
transgender theory; gender  
reassignment; autobiography  
as genre

This article examines the forms of writing that transgender (hereafter ‘trans’) people in North America, the United Kingdom and Australia have used to convey their experiences to a wider public, since the first sex reassignment surgeries were performed during the inter-war period. I will discuss how transsexual people first used memoir to counter sensationalistic mass media coverage, and then how feminist critiques of their works led to ‘post-transsexual’ theory, which deconstructed the conventions and clichés that the transition memoir *genre* had developed. These theorists suggested new ways to document gender-variant lives beyond a generalised desire for public acceptance and in response to social concerns: the policies of the gender identity clinics, who decided who could access medical services, and on what terms, especially the demand that patients ‘pass’ in their acquired genders and hide their histories; and the exclusion of trans people from feminist spaces, and gay/lesbian politics. Post-transsexual theorists’ texts often drew heavily on their own experiences: thus, they ensured that directly autobiographical writing would remain the dominant mode of trans discourse, even as they rejected the

established structures of memoir. Indeed, the most interesting, formally inventive theory included plenty of autobiographical material, looking at how transphobia in places from the medical establishment to mass media impacted on our actual lives – a line that could be traced from Bornstein via Julia Serano’s influential *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity* (2007) through to *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era* (2013) by Beatriz (later Paul B.) Preciado. Here, I will explore how trans-identified authors have used fiction, or a blurring of boundaries between autobiography and fiction, to resist some of the structural and social limits of trans life writing, and suggest ways in which this formal exploration may be more rewarding, both aesthetically and politically. I will then discuss representations of trans people in mainstream media in the United Kingdom, ways in which I used life writing to challenge the terms of that representation, and how authors might use a greater variety of fictional (in addition to or instead of autobiographical) techniques to explore a wider range of gender positions.

The first sex reassignment surgeries grew out of late nineteenth and early twentieth century sexology – and specifically its use of gender-variant life stories. Berlin-based sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld thought that rather than being inherently linked to homosexuality (as his London counterpart Havelock Ellis suggested, with his theory of ‘sexual inversion’), cross-dressing represented an ‘independent complex’ that could not ‘be ordered according to recognised models’ (28–29). To test this, Hirschfeld interviewed numerous people who wanted to dress as – or *be* – the opposite sex. He based his conclusion that gender identity was a separate issue to sexual orientation on their testimony, which formed a crucial aspect of his influential survey, *The Transvestites: The Erotic Drive to Cross-Dress* (1910).

After the First World War, Hirschfeld continued his research, which led to the separation of ‘transvestite’ and ‘transsexual’ into distinct categories. He supervised some of the surgeries performed on Danish artist Lili Elbe, who died in 1931 after a failed attempt to transplant a uterus into her body. Her life story, *Man into Woman*, was published posthumously in 1933 – the first autobiographical account of a transsexual life. Intriguingly, this text played with the conventions of the transition memoir even before they were set: this was not a linear story, nor was Elbe its sole author. Although the book incorporated Elbe’s diaries and letters, and conversations with the ‘editor’ Niels Hoyer, who ordered her fragments, its protagonist used the name ‘Andreas Sparre’ (rather than Elbe, or Einar Wegener, as she was previously known), while Hoyer was a pseudonym for the German writer Ernst Ludwig Jacobson (Harrod, ‘The tragic true story’). Later, I will discuss Philippe Lejeune’s ‘pact’, which said that ‘identity between author’s and narrator-protagonist’s name is the primary requisite of autobiography’ (Marcus 193), but these pseudonyms were less likely an attempt to play with the (unspoken) laws of life writing, and more probably (in Hoyer’s case) a self-protective measure, used in the awareness that the one of first organisations the Nazis had attacked on taking power in January 1933 was Hirschfeld’s Institute for Sexual Science.

After the Second World War, research into gender variance began again – in the United States, where displaced German sexologists such as Harry Benjamin had settled. In December 1952, transsexual people became global news, when the *New York Daily Times* featured Christine Jorgensen under the headline ‘Ex-GI Becomes Blonde Beauty’. Jorgensen became the subject of frenzied media coverage, as did models and actors

such as April Ashley or Caroline Cossey, who were outed by the British tabloids. Despite (or maybe *because*) of this, many more people came out over the following decades, as transsexual people went from being isolated examples of a scientific possibility to a group that threatened established categories of male and female – positing a threat both to conservative gender roles and to a burgeoning second-wave feminist movement whose tactic of creating ‘women-only’ spaces relied upon strict gender demarcation. During this time, with growing public interest in the subject, numerous transition memoirs were published, mostly by transsexual women (including Jorgensen and Ashley). Consequently, the transition memoir became a genre, with recognisable clichés and conventions – not all of which sat comfortably with feminist or gender-variant readers.

Many of these conventions were codified in its most famous exponent, *Conundrum* (1974) by Jan Morris, who differed from most authors of similar books in that, being an acclaimed travel writer, she was known for something besides transition (and so could avoid being typecast as a ‘transsexual author’). In 1972, she came out as transsexual; knowing that this would be of interest to the British press, she took control of her story. The resultant book was set in a heterosexual and cisgender context, positioning her transsexual impulse as a problem to be weighed against the possibility of losing her family, social circles or career, opening with the realisation that ‘I [*was*] born into the wrong body, and should really be a girl’ (Morris 79) and climaxing with the surgery, undertaken with Dr Georges Burou in Casablanca.

In 1987, the US artist, activist and academic Sandy Stone wrote ‘The *Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto*’, which became influential after being distributed on early online networks. This was a reply to the academic/activist Janice Raymond’s notorious *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male* (1979), which cast male-to-female transsexuality as a plot to infiltrate the feminist movement’s spaces, prompted in part by her resentment of Stone’s employment at the women-only collective Olivia Records. Addressing Stone, Raymond wrote that ‘transsexually constructed lesbian-feminist[s]’ were able to ‘[insert] themselves into the positions of importance and/or performance in the feminist community’ (133) by duping people into accepting them as women, blaming Stone for creative ‘divisiveness’ in that community; this, implied Raymond, was an ever greater crime than that committed by most transsexual women, who ‘attempt to possess women in a bodily sense while acting out the images into which men have molded women’ (that is, conforming to patriarchal stereotypes of femininity) (132).

Stone’s manifesto did not open with Raymond, however, but with critiques of Morris and Elbe – this implicitly set up a dichotomy between memoir as something written for ‘outsiders’ while theory was *for* the trans community. Here, Stone examined how they and other memoirists provided little sense of continuity between male and female, casting their surgery as the moment when they became women. ‘No wonder [*that*] feminist theories have been suspicious’, wrote Stone, highlighting confluences of physical sex with learned gender roles, such as the point in *Man into Woman* that implausibly described Elbe’s handwriting becoming ‘a woman’s script’ after surgery (225). Stone asked the vital question of who these texts were *for*, as the gender identity clinics that handled patients did not consider them as reliable insights into the transsexual condition, and continued to tell transsexual people to ‘erase [*themselves*], to fade into the “normal” population as soon as possible’ (230).

Stone identified the imperative to ‘pass’ as the main barrier to honest transsexual life writing – in particular, ‘passing’ made it impossible to counter the feminist argument that transsexual people conformed to ‘stereotypical behaviours’ that, as sociologist Carol Riddell had argued in *Divided Sisterhood* (a response to Raymond published in 1980), were ‘prescribed by patriarchy for either sex’ (146). Stone took up this point, arguing that ‘Transsexuals who pass [*in their acquired gender*] ignore the fact that by creating totalized, monistic identities ... they have foreclosed the possibility of authentic relationships’ (132) (an activity ‘familiar to the person of color whose skin is light enough to pass as white, or to the closet gay or lesbian’.) Instead, argued Stone, such people enter the discourse around transsexuality, conceiving themselves ‘not as a class or problematic “third gender”’ but ‘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’ (231). This inspired a generation of North American activist-theorists, who focused more on the social challenges of gender-variant life; those who did not abandon the conventional memoir format certainly adapted it freely to suit their political purposes.

One problem with transition memoirs was that they created an impression of people being focused more on themselves than any wider community. This was a structural issue in a genre that necessarily concentrated on individual experience, exacerbated by its long-standing role in countering lurid media coverage of transsexual lives by placing them within ‘respectable’ heterosexual and gender-normative contexts. Edited volumes of life stories, such as *Trans-X-U-All* (1997) and *Finding the Real Me* (2003), both collated by Tracie O’Keefe and Katrina Fox, aimed to create a sense of diversity, including people of colour, female-to-male, non-binary or ‘genderqueer’, and/or working-class people who diverged from the familiar story – that of the transsexual woman making a clear move from ‘male’ to ‘female’ via hormones and surgery (which, in the US, were expensive to access). Such collections could also circumvent the established narrative by focusing on a specific issue, such as the relationship between gender and sexuality, explored by authors such as Greta Christina, David Harrison, and D. Travers in *PoMoSexuals: Challenging Assumptions about Gender and Sexuality* (Queen and Schimel).

The playwright and performance artist Kate Bornstein contributed to *PoMoSexuals*, having made her name with *My Gender Workbook* and *Gender Outlaw* (1994), a hybrid text that presented her performance scripts and plays alongside chapters that looked at how the media and wider prejudice had shaped her life and work. She lamented a limit placed upon trans life writing by audiences, or by editors’ and publishers’ *expectations* of their audiences: 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.’ (Bornstein 12–13) In response, Bornstein suggested that authors create new metaphors that would generate a ‘transgendered writing style’ (Bornstein 4), and change the terms of discussion. Like Sandy Stone, Bornstein emphasised the need for open dialogue *led* by trans people, rather than ‘passing’. ‘Silence does equal death,’ Bornstein wrote, referencing Act Up’s slogan about the HIV/AIDS crisis. ‘That principle applies to any culturally-mandated silence’, which Bornstein described as ‘the therapeutic lie’ (recommended by the clinics, whose purpose was apparently to look after the mental wellbeing of patients) ‘that eventually causes us to go mad’ (-Bornstein 94).

*Gender Outlaw* followed Stone's suggestion that 'posttranssexual' people mix genres, both in the author's refusal to identify as either male or female and in its structure. Alternate chapters used autobiographical material to make theoretical points, opening with one about how hard it had been for Bornstein to realise and express a 'non-traditional gender identity' in a society where anyone who did was ridiculed and monstered in the media (Bornstein 8). From there, she experimented with numerous methods of representation: transcripts of genuine interviews and invented ones with interrogators who had impersonal names such as 'Issues'; quiz questions for readers; fragments of poetry; anecdotes about how Bornstein's gender presentation was received, from school camping trips to TV chat shows; film criticism; reflections on texts such as Suzanne Kessler and Wendy McKenna's *Gender: An Ethnomethodological Approach* (1978); and scripts in which Bornstein's ideas about gender identity and society were used in semi-fictional or performative contexts. (That said, it was always clear which sections were theoretical, which were autobiographical and which used some creative license or artifice.)

Eventually, Bornstein did write a more conventional memoir – *A Queer and Pleasant Danger* (Bornstein), billed on its cover as 'The true story of a nice Jewish boy who joins the Church of Scientology and leaves twelve years later to become the lovely lady she is today', and notable for its extensive description of Bornstein's sexual experiences, before and after transition, rarely found in preceding memoirs. Perhaps, after two decades in which she and others had made memoir less dominant over trans writing, Bornstein felt able to revisit the form with some of the recent critiques of it in mind, as well as using it to cover other aspects of her life.

\*

*Stone Butch Blues: A Novel*, by Bornstein's contemporary Leslie Feinberg (1949–2014), also expressed a position between male and female, but pushed even harder against the limits of life writing, blurring the lines between 'fiction' and 'memoir' in ways that even *Gender Outlaw* did not. Published by Firebrand in 1993, it won a Lambda Literary Award (Small Press book) and the American Library Association's Lesbian/Gay Book Award (Fiction). Even before its text began, its paratexts offered signs that it would occupy a contestable space between genres. Its front cover featured a photograph of Feinberg – a stylised, airbrushed image that recalled 1980s digital portraiture, simultaneously representing and de-familiarising the author.

The back cover's paratextual material opens with 'Woman or man? That's the question that rages like a storm around Jess Goldberg, clouding her life and her identity', before describing Goldberg'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 1970s. The author's own biography is 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.' A disclaimer states: 'This is a work of fiction. Any similarity between characters and people, dead or alive, is a coincidence' (Feinberg 2). The acknowledgements, however, explicitly linked the text back to Feinberg's own experiences: '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!' (4).

The novel itself is a *Bildungsroman*, explaining, in the first person, how Jess Goldberg comes to define as a stone butch (a masculine lesbian who does not like to be touched)

through an engagement with the queer urban subcultures of New York before the Stonewall riots, and an understanding of how those subcultures intersect with a hostile wider world. In it, Goldberg is raped; beaten during police raids on the bars where the butches meet with femme lesbians, drag queens and other outsiders; and set up to be injured by a factory floor manager, who distrusts not just Goldberg's gender identity but also his Jewishness and trade union activity. (Feinberg wrote about pronouns for people who did not fit into 'him' or 'her', 'he' or 'she', or 'he-she', used as an insult and reclaimed in *Stone Butch Blues*. I use 'ze' and 'hir', as Feinberg preferred.)

Although the narrative begins with 'I didn't want to be different' (which, after all, is often true for gender-variant individuals) and the pain of not fitting into the categories of 'boy' or 'girl', Goldberg does not move from the fraught 'he-she' position towards maleness until halfway through the novel. At this point, it feels more like the older transsexual memoirs, in that it explores the challenges of shifting from one gender position to another rather than the struggles of occupying a space between or outside them (Feinberg 13). The scenes at the beginning of chapter 15, in particular, feel like classic transition memoir fare: the mirror scene, where Goldberg first notices the effects of testosterone and the joy at realising that breast reduction surgery is almost affordable (Goldberg never seriously contemplates phalloplasty, perhaps as it was prohibitively expensive and not always effective during the post-war period); the strange thrill of being called 'sir' on daring to 'enter men's turf' at the barber; and getting through 'the most important test of all: the men's room' (Feinberg 171–72). In many other accounts, such 'success' would be an important step towards resolution, but Goldberg turns away, and relates that opening some avenues closes others, as getting male identification in order to drive (or work) may prove impossible (Feinberg 175).

The first scene of Goldberg buying men's clothes anticipates this refusal to blend in, being conducted not with a view to avoiding attention, but attracting it, as 'three powerful queens in full drag' come to help Jess choose a suit to wear while compering a show at the Malibou club (Feinberg 58). Later, in trying to 'pass' within straight society, Goldberg worries about selling out those who couldn't, and the butches' admiration for this ability only amplifies his guilt. As uncomfortable with being seen as male as female, Goldberg stops taking testosterone, and feels ambivalent about his position between traditional roles, mainly because it leads others to police his gender:

My hips strained the seams of men's pants. My beard grew wispy and fine from electrolysis. My face looked softer. Once my voice was hormone-lowered, however, it stayed there. And my chest was still flat. My body was blending gender characteristics, and I wasn't the only one who noticed. (Feinberg 224)

Two-thirds of the way through the story – rather than at its climax, like Jan Morris – Goldberg sets up the 'epiphany' of sex reassignment surgery, only to reject it, and shift the focus to the social: "I've seen about it on TV. I don't feel like a man trapped in a woman's body. I just feel trapped." (Feinberg 158–59)

In his ground-breaking *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*, the first book-length study of such narratives from a trans perspective, Jay Prosser devotes a whole chapter to 'Transgender and Trans-Genre' in *Stone Butch Blues*. He writes 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’ (Prosser 178). *Stone Butch Blues* complicates the old transition narrative and subverted one of its 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 alongside the ‘extra-text’ that surrounded and shaped its reception, Prosser argues that Feinberg’s evasion of the ‘homecoming’ trope relies upon the ambiguity over whether *Stone Butch Blues* should be taken as fiction or memoir.

How deliberate this ambiguity was is up for debate: Feinberg certainly 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 (Prosser 191). However, in an earlier interview for an 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, you know? ... 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. (Prosser 192)

Prosser focuses on Goldberg’s ambivalence about ‘passing’ as a man, and *Stone Butch Blues*’ reticence about ‘passing’ as a novel, and its radical refusal of closure; he notes Feinberg’s distinction between ‘truth’ and ‘facts’, and how hir narrative draws parallels between the police that 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 through disclosure of verifiable details. Considering this, Feinberg’s use of even a ‘bad’ pseudonym (‘Jess’ and ‘Leslie’ are ambivalently gendered and ‘Goldberg’ resembles ‘Feinberg’, ethnically and phonemically) is enough to buy hir out, and keep *Stone Butch Blues* in that trans-genre space: its events do not need to have happened to Feinberg, but to have plausibly happened to members of the trans/lesbian subculture of which Goldberg is a part (Prosser 196–97).

By taking *Stone Butch Blues* into a genre position that is first clarified as ‘A Novel’ and then confused, Feinberg managed to escape not just the conventions of the transsexual memoir, but also many of its pressures. Whilst not primarily an imperative aimed at trans people, like hir *Transgender Liberation* pamphlet (1992), it did not convey a sense of striving to justify itself to outsiders like most of the texts after Hedy Jo Star’s *I Changed My Sex* (1953), named by Stone as ‘the first fully autobiographical’ transsexual account (224). Feinberg could not avoid *Stone Butch Blues* being read through the prism of hir own life, however, and the publisher’s framing did not help (although one would be surprised if ze did not have much input/influence over this), although its contemporary critics were largely from the LGBT community, and so, like Prosser, appreciated the author’s reasons for its being ‘trans-genre’.

This relationship between queer narratives, the ‘extra-text’ and authenticity was pushed to the limit at the turn of the millennium, by the emergence of J.T. LeRoy’s novels *Sarah*



(1999) and *The Heart is Deceitful Above All Things* (2001), his subsequent adoption into the celebrity wing of American counter-culture and the 2005 revelation that LeRoy was not an 18-year-old, HIV-positive former hustler with gender dysphoria from California, as was claimed six years earlier, but a New York-based thirty-something mother named Laura Albert who had persuaded her sister-in-law (Savannah Knoop) to be 'LeRoy' in public. Amidst the anger of embarrassed people who had helped what they saw as a troubled youth and called LeRoy 'a hoax', Warren St John's *New York Times* exposé (9 January 2006) raised a fascinating issue: 'It is unclear what effect the unmasking of Ms. Knoop 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 to the story behind them.' ('The Unmasking of JT Leroy')

It seemed that readers were not responding *either* to the text *or* to the author, but the intersection between them: it was not just that the novels were good, but also that they apparently came from someone so young and disadvantaged, and drew on that past, incorporating numerous signifiers that seemed chosen to appeal to those enthralled US counter-culture – homelessness and hustling in small-town America, gender ambiguity and sexual exploration, with a very 1990s glamorisation of being a 'fucked up' teenager. There was a cruel irony in the contrast between Feinberg's aim of liberating trans writers from the memoirist's obligation to stick to the facts and some trans readers' desire for an authentic experience behind LeRoy's texts, and disappointment in finding out that someone who apparently took a trans voice beyond specialist LGBT publishers (such as Firebrand) and into the literary mainstream turned out not to be a trans woman, even if Albert's defence that the books had always been sold as 'fiction' was accurate. (One answerphone message recorded by Albert and featured in Jeff Feuerzeig's documentary *Author: The JT LeRoy Story* (2016) said 'the transgender community is going to want to fucking lynch you.')

\*

I had somehow missed the LeRoy affair at the time, even though it played out as I was trying to establish myself as a trans-identified writer of cultural criticism and fiction. Trans issues were not the only thing I wrote about by any means – most of my published journalism and (largely) unpublished short fiction covered literature, film or art – but it was important to me to write about gender identity. In my youth, I had lacked a vocabulary to understand my gender dysphoria, and become frustrated with the ignorance or hostility with which trans people and politics were covered in newspapers and magazines, film and television. Bornstein, Feinberg and Stone had given me a language – not just specific terminology, but an entire paradigm through which I could better think about my body and how it interacted with the wider world – but a decade or more since their texts were first published, I did not see their perspectives anywhere within the mainstream media.

What I *did* find in the mid-2000s, in the apparently 'progressive' *Guardian*, were several pieces reiterating Janice Raymond's take on transsexual people, watered down to fit within the 'respectable' limits of liberal-left discourse. Julie Bindel's 'Gender benders, beware' article of January 2004 became a touchstone for trans activists who organised online: Bindel's piece, published in print and on the *Guardian* website, began by supporting Vancouver Rape Relief's decision not to allow a transsexual woman to train as a counsellor for female rape survivors, and moved into a broadside against trans people in general,

concluding that: ‘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.’

By the summer of 2009, with the help of the first wave of transgender theorists and successors such as Julia Serano, I had come to define as ‘transsexual’, and sought a referral to the Gender Identity Clinic in West London in the hope of getting hormones and sex reassignment surgery. A friend suggested that I pitch a blog to the *Guardian* site, documenting the physical and social experiences of transition in real time. The paper’s coverage of trans issues had become mired in arguments about ‘freedom of speech’ ever since Bindel’s article had prompted over two hundred complaints and demonstrations at LGBT events where she appeared – an organised opposition that columnists such as Beatrix Campbell labelled ‘censorship’ (‘Censoring Julie Bindel’). This, I felt, should not be taken at face value, especially as the characterisation of trans issues as too ‘academic’ for mainstream audiences (notably in Julie Burchill’s subsequently deleted *Observer* article, ‘Transsexuals should cut it out’ of January 2013) served to exclude trans people from a political discourse in which we were attacked from all sides (Pugh).

A rolling blog, I thought, might change the nature of the *Guardian*’s trans discussions, and allow me to challenge the stereotypes and assumptions on which those hostile feminists relied, without having to argue on the terms that they set (and so getting lumped in with ‘censorious’ trans activists who did so). In a journalistic discourse that felt like it was 20 or 30 years behind activist and academic ones, borrowing a strategy from Carol Riddell and Sandy Stone seemed like an effective tactic. The limitless space available online (with the low fees for blogs – usually £90 per post – meaning it represented little financial risk for the *Guardian*) meant I could follow Stone’s imperative to ‘mix genres’ by bringing in trans theory and cultural history to get beyond the ‘long-suffering romantic stuff’ that Bornstein had lamented in the 1990s, while still using a framework that the *Guardian* editors would recognise and, thus, permit. (It was their choice, not mine, to entitle it *A Transgender Journey*.)

In the process, I hoped to demonstrate to print editors and broadcast commissioners that wider audiences would be interested in (and understand) trans people’s writing about our personal and political concerns if we were allowed to present it to them. The space I had targeted was vital: there were many transition blogs by 2009, but none in a publication with the *Guardian*’s reach – I knew from my various mid-2000s office jobs that many people who would not seek out trans theory might click on (or share) my articles, and be challenged by them, thus eroding the (largely unspoken) borders between cis and trans audiences. This was helped further by having an open comments section, which allowed a community to grow around the series and show that support for, and hostility to, trans people cut across lines of class, sexuality and gender. Importantly, it provided a forum for other trans people to outline their experiences, reinforce (or contradict) my arguments and voice opinions about the newspaper’s past coverage, without needing to name specific writers. This, I hoped, might offer a transformative perspective for cis readers, encouraging them to rethink the terms on which they read about our lives – something that I tried to raise directly when it felt appropriate.

After getting the series commissioned and finding a large audience with the first three pieces, I was allowed to write as many entries as I required to complete my narratives and get my points across. Eventually, I wrote 30 articles between 2010 and 2012, which allowed

me to unpack some long-established assumptions. In the 16th article, long after I had established myself as a character and explained the basics of the reassignment process, I could reach more complex conclusions about ideas such as being ‘trapped in the wrong body’, which had long since become a cliché in descriptions of transsexuality. Instead, I could state that I had never quite felt like this; it was more the case that I could only function ‘if I re-launched the symbiotic relationship between my body and mind from a starting position that felt right.’ (Jacques)

After I published the 3000-word article about my sex reassignment surgery – having little choice but to replicate the climactic structure of previous narratives – an agent approached me about turning the column into a book. Ever since the series had begun, people had asked if I intended to do so: I always said no, because the important thing had been the blog format, as a Trojan horse to take trans history, theory and politics to a wider audience, with the rolling publication meaning that the surgical peak was not pre-determined. There were numerous books telling transition stories, and I thought the entire genre was dated: I struggled to see what re-writing *A Transgender Journey* might achieve. After conversations with trans friends, I felt that writing about something else (as I did in my *New Statesman* blog that I secured through the *Guardian* series, in which I wrote mostly about the arts) would be more politically useful, showing young trans people that they did not have to write only about their own lives.

Having considerably raised my profile, I found that agents and publishers were coming to me for a book, but they declined my suggestions for other projects (such as a history of trans people in Britain, or a collection of short stories that included several about trans individuals) in favour of a memoir based on the *Guardian* blog. If I wanted to write fiction, plays or screenplays – as had been my original goal – then I would have to do a memoir first.

Working within this genre, I would be bound by Lejeune’s autobiographical pact, needing not just to convey ‘the truth’ of my experiences but also to stick to the facts. My efforts to avoid the obligation to ‘strip or be stripped’ would have to be made via its structure, direct address to readers, and the inclusion of material that unpicked some of the clichés and conventions of trans memoirs and other media coverage, rather than by obfuscating the character of its protagonist like ‘auto-fiction’ authors such as Chris Kraus or Sheila Heti (whose novels had central characters who shared their names, with narratives that invited readers to guess what had happened and what was invented). Even writing ‘A Novel’ like *Stone Butch Blues* did not feel plausible: with the *Guardian* series behind it, I felt that any first-person narrative would be read as autobiography, negating the freedom that Feinberg had mentioned to Prosser.

Despite these limitations, I accepted an invitation from Verso Books to write *Trans* in July 2013. With the contract signed, I had to work out how to make the book sufficiently different to the blog to make it worthwhile – and how to avoid some of the traps of the transition memoir. I decided to cross-cut between chapters about my life and interludes about representations of trans people in the media to avoid the problem of memoir not placing individual experiences within a wider context, and included a conversation with Sheila Heti as an Epilogue, where we discussed the possibilities and frustrations of documenting trans experiences in mainstream spaces, and talked explicitly about how transition ‘didn’t feel’ like a ‘mythical hero’s journey’ but ‘a bunch of hoops to jump through while working in boring jobs’ (294). I got around the pitfall of building up to

surgery as the climactic point by using a facsimile of my *Guardian* account as the opening chapter, in part to establish that my book would simultaneously be about my transition, and my relationship with the media, and the psychological effects of those two things becoming intertwined. As *A Transgender Journey* changed my life – launching me into different social circles in a different city, as I moved from Brighton to London to pursue my writing career – it was not difficult to bring this subject matter into *Trans: A Memoir*.

Indeed, my favourite passage of the book came near the end, when I reflected on my visit to a glamorous literary party at a prestigious London venue:

I'd felt like an outsider all evening, thinking about how comment journalism wasn't for me, with its strident with-us-or-against-us arguments, and how tiresome I found it when prominent columnists claimed not to be part of 'the Establishment'. Even if my perspective was unusual within those circles, I was now definitely part of them. (257)

In conclusion, I noted that 'If you articulate an outsider critique well enough, you stop being one' (302), referring to the way in which I was invited to meet many of the journalists whose views I had opposed, and who expressed an interest in my work. I began to rely on them for access to spaces where I might counter their opinions – and felt that I could not single anyone out, or be too vociferous in my criticisms of them, or of the media in general.

The book was published in September 2015 with the subtitle of 'A Memoir' – as a conscious nod to Feinberg, as well as a rejection of 'more commercial' ones suggested by Verso, such as 'finding the real me'. (The cover echoed *Stone Butch Blues*, as I declined my editor's suggestion that I use a photograph and asked that writer/illustrator Joanna Walsh draw me; Australian trans author Tom Cho's semi-autobiographical short fiction collection *Look Who's Morphing* [2009] employed a similarly stylised image.) But for all the ways in which I tried to resist the formal limitations of memoir, I still had the fundamental problem that Feinberg described two decades earlier. Every chapter I sent to my editor came back with a request to be 'more personal' – as had happened with the *Guardian* – but I didn't feel comfortable in going deeper into my mental health issues, my sexuality or my relationship with clothes when transphobic people often attacked us as fetishists, lunatics or superficial, and trans theorists expressed concerns that autobiographical writing might play into their hands.

In *Trans: A Memoir*, I had to react against the idea that memoir was for cisgender outsiders whilst theory was for trans people by attempting to combine personal experiences and political reflections, aiming for trans readers who were still working out their identities. Having completed it, I felt compelled to return to fiction, thinking that it might enable me to entirely avoid that dichotomy. Certainly, its flexibility allowed me to get around framing transness as a 'problem' (as trans activist, poet and publisher Cat Fitzpatrick put it in her acute assessment of my book and the structural limitations of memoir for Lambda Literary) by focusing on a smaller section of someone's life than the long self-realisation of transition, or putting characters in situations where their genders complicated their relationships or goals.

I preferred short fiction as a means of avoiding a centralised narrative – and, of course, of detaching the writing from my own life, about which I felt I had nothing more to say, at least not in an autobiographical format. I did not make any distinctions about whether the

text was for 'cis' or 'trans' readers: I hoped that my extensive first-person documentation would lend credibility, but that the authenticity of my characters' experiences would come through in my texts. I did not limit myself to writing about trans people, but the tension I'd had in journalism remained – of not wanting to feel restricted or typecast, but also feeling that covering these issues was important. So, I published fiction about various subjects, not worrying too much about whether I brought a trans perspective to them, but returned to my plan for a body of trans short stories, partly in hope of using a different form to further change the terms of discussion about trans lives.

Before it came out, an editor at Catapult asked for a piece that would tie in with it. Initially, she requested an essay that would interweave my life experiences with a reading of post-war *avant-garde* author Ann Quin. Via email, I suggested a 'semi-fictional response', set in mid-2000s Brighton, that built on Quin's themes (masculinity and gender, the disappearance of Brighton's 'old' end-of-the-pier entertainment, and the shabbiness of the town). This would let me further explore the time and place evoked in my memoir, but use material that did not fit, or that I was reluctant to include for fear that it would be attached to me, or the wider community.

One problem I'd had with writing a memoir was that throughout my life I'd tried to explore and express my gender identity with as little drama as possible. In the resultant story, *Weekend in Brighton*, I could imagine how situations where I had avoided conflict might have turned out differently, and felt able to explore a trans woman's sexuality 'as the disruptive, excessive reality and experience it mostly is', as Jacqueline Rose put it in a *London Review of Books* essay prompted by my book, entitled 'Who do you think you are?', where she noted that the textual obligation to hide ambivalence about 'passing' meant that most memoirs (including mine) made little space for sex (12). To discuss sex, especially any pre-transitional encounters, would require me to talk extensively about my body, and about my genitalia, running the risk that readers would unambiguously read me as male, undermining the identity that I had carefully set up in my text, and in my life. I thought about combining the material of memoir and the theoretical imperative set by Stone (that Rose also mentioned) and drew my experiences of stultifying post-graduate jobs, having little money, exploring my gender and sexuality without anyone to guide me, meeting others who had been in similar isolation and trying not to let our internalised transphobia damage our relationships, into a single story.

One discovery was that my central character did not need to be labelled, or self-label, in terms of gender – I could introduce the underlying issue with 'today, as most days, he *was* Patrick, not Trish' but avoid words such as 'cross-dresser', 'transvestite' or 'transsexual' (Jacques). This moved the focus away from those identities and towards sexuality, with a sense that the 'butch' and 'femme' venues that had survived the AIDS epidemic and the assimilationist gay and lesbian politics that followed were not welcoming towards gender-variant people; I found at the time that fetish clubs were a more open environment, and so too does Patrick/Trish.

In a scene in a shop that sells clothes and accessories to male-to-female people, protagonist Patrick/Trish (whose pronouns shift with gender presentation) bonds with Brian/Bree – an older person who also has a female persona. This connects them before they meet at the Harlequin, a trans-friendly club that often had drag performances, which I talk about in my memoir (Jacques, 48–51, 73–74, 95–97). In the first draft of *Trans: A Memoir*, I also documented a visit to its S/M night, but my editor told me to remove it;

I drew on the unpublished journal material that I had used for those expurgated passages into the climactic scenes of *Weekend in Brighton* where Trish and Bree find that they enjoy spanking each other in the club, but Trish goes to Bree's hotel to find that she cannot relax into similar interaction for fear of attracting attention. Ultimately, their connection does not survive as Trish retreats from her own desires, but the story could address ways in which sexuality can act as a motor for personal developments when the memoir could not, as its focus remained primarily on my transition.

When Audible turned *Trans* into an audio book, they asked me to record extra material: I chose *Weekend in Brighton*, further positioning it as fiction that was close to memoir, and blurring the genre lines in Feinberg's spirit. This meant the story could reach a wider audience – as trans memoir, thanks to the workings of the market and the prejudices of editors and publishers, remains far more prominent than fiction. It also allowed me to bring more explicit sexual content into the memoir's orbit, but without intruding upon its structure, and indeed, it is structure that is crucial: it may be that the traditional memoir's purpose, in 'normalising' transition for a cisgender audience, is now less useful, socially, than finding new ways to tell stories that can express an infinite variety of gender positions, currently being explored via blogs and social networks.

### Notes on contributor

*Juliet Jacques* is a writer based in London. Her fiction has appeared in *3:AM*, *Berfrois*, *Five Dials*, *The London Magazine* and *Necessary Fiction*, and her journalism in publications such as *The New Inquiry*, *New Statesman*, *The Daily Telegraph* and *The London Review of Books*. In 2011 her 'Transgender Journey' series for *The Guardian* was longlisted for the Orwell Prize. Her book, *Trans: A Memoir*, is published by Verso.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

### References

- Author: *The JT LeRoy Story*. Directed by Jeff Feuerzeig. Vice Films, 2016.
- Bindel, Julie. "Gender Benders, Beware." *The Guardian* 31 Jan. 2004. Web. 19 Aug. 2016. <[www.theguardian.com/world/2004/jan/31/gender.weekend7](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2004/jan/31/gender.weekend7)>.
- Bornstein, Kate. *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us*. New York: Vintage, 1995.
- Bornstein, Kate. *A Queer and Pleasant Danger*. Boston: Beacon, 2012.
- Campbell, Beatrix. "Censoring Julie Bindel." *The Guardian* 31 Jan. 2010. Web. 19 Aug. 2016. <[www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/jan/31/julie-bindel-transgender-nus](http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/jan/31/julie-bindel-transgender-nus)>.
- Feinberg, Leslie. *Stone Butch Blues: A Novel*. New York: Firebrand, 1993.
- Fitzpatrick, Cat. "'Trans' by Juliet Jacques." *Lambda Literary* 3 Nov. 2015. Web. 8 Aug. 2016. <[www.lambdaliterary.org/reviews/11/03/trans-by-juliet-jacques](http://www.lambdaliterary.org/reviews/11/03/trans-by-juliet-jacques)>.
- Harrod, Horatia. "The Tragic True Story Behind *The Danish Girl*." *The Daily Telegraph* 28 Feb. 2016. Web. 27 July 2016. <[www.telegraph.co.uk/films/2016/04/14/the-tragic-true-story-behind-the-danish-girl](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/films/2016/04/14/the-tragic-true-story-behind-the-danish-girl)>.
- Hirschfeld, Magnus. "Selections from *The Transvestites: The Erotic Drive to Cross-Dress*." *The Transgender Studies Reader*. Eds Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle. New York: Routledge, 2006. 28–39.

- Jacques, Juliet. "Finally, Slowly, My Body was Catching Up with My Mind." *The Guardian* 12 Jan. 2011. Web. 19 Aug. 2016. [www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2011/jan/12/transgender-health-and-wellbeing](http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2011/jan/12/transgender-health-and-wellbeing).
- Jacques, Juliet. *Trans: A Memoir*. London/New York: Verso, 2015.
- Jacques, Juliet. "Weekend in Brighton." *Catapult* 20 Oct. 2015. Web. 24 Aug. 2016. <[catapult.co/stories/weekend-in-brighton](http://catapult.co/stories/weekend-in-brighton)>.
- Marcus, Laura. *Auto/biographical Discourses: Criticism, Theory, Practice*. Manchester/New York: Manchester University Press, 1994.
- Morris, Jan. "Conundrum." *Sexual Metamorphosis: An Anthology of Transsexual Memoirs*. Ed. Jonathan Ames. London: Vintage, 2005. 77–98.
- Prosser, Jay. *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*. Chichester/New York: Columbia University Press, 1998.
- Pugh, Andrew. "Mulholland Pulls Burchill's 'Disgusting' Transsexuals Rant: 'We Got It Wrong'." *Press Gazette* 15 Jan. 2013. Web. 19 Aug. 2016. <[www.pressgazette.co.uk/mulholland-pulls-burchills-disgusting-transsexuals-rant-we-got-it-wrong](http://www.pressgazette.co.uk/mulholland-pulls-burchills-disgusting-transsexuals-rant-we-got-it-wrong)>.
- Queen, Carol, and Lawrence Schimel, eds. *PoMoSexuals: Challenging Assumptions about Gender and Sexuality*. San Francisco: Cleis, 1997.
- Raymond, Janice G. "Sappho by Surgery." *The Transgender Studies Reader*. Eds Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle. New York: Routledge, 2006. 131–143.
- Riddell, Carol. "Divided Sisterhood: A Critical Review of Janice Raymond's *The Transsexual Empire*." *The Transgender Studies Reader*. Eds Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle. New York: Routledge, 2006. 144–158.
- Rose, Jacqueline. "Who Do You Think You Are?" *London Review of Books* 5 May 2016. Web. 27 Feb. 2017. <[www.lrb.co.uk/v38/n09/jacqueline-rose/who-do-you-think-you-are](http://www.lrb.co.uk/v38/n09/jacqueline-rose/who-do-you-think-you-are)>.
- St. John, Warren. "The Unmasking of JT Leroy: In Public, He's a She." *New York Times* 9 Jan. 2006. Web. 3 Aug. 2016. <[www.nytimes.com/2006/01/09/books/09book.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/09/books/09book.html)>.
- Stone, Sandy. "The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto." *The Transgender Studies Reader*. Eds Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle. New York: Routledge, 2006. 221–235.