

Raewyn
Connell

TRANS
LIVES

Social Realities
Across the Globe

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Trans Lives

Social Realities across the Globe

RAEWYN CONNELL

polity

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Introduction

Call it sex change, gender reassignment, gender affirmation, or gender transition. It is a very intimate *and* a very public process. It often means changes in the body, and always means changes in the way the body is seen by others. Relationships with family, friends, lovers, neighbours and workmates are likely to change. Transition can redirect one's whole course in life. It can mean new beginnings and new endings, pain and joy, grief and exaltation.

As a change of social position, gender transition is shaped by social structures, customs and laws. Therefore it takes different shapes in different places and times. Social responses change: broadly, in the last half-century there has been increasing acceptance of gender transition, in countries where it was not already an established custom. Support centres have been established, and laws that give better recognition to change of civil status have been passed, such as the pioneering 2012 Law of Gender Identity in Argentina. Research has expanded, and medical treatment has become more sophisticated and usually more respectful.

Yet contrary to media images of glamour and money, many trans groups around the world live in stark poverty. For many, work is precarious, housing is poor, there is a high risk of illness and a short expectation of life. Feminized trans groups especially can face social prejudice, police harassment and vigilante violence, including murder. There are places where defenders speak of 'transfemicide'.

On top of this, in recent years there has been an anti-trans offensive from right-wing politicians, conservative

churches, authoritarian governments and even a faction of feminists. Between them, these forces have constructed remarkably hostile fantasies about trans people. Their campaigns have practical effects: in a number of places, rights have been abolished, services have been destroyed and harassment has increased. This can easily get worse.

It is not surprising that there is a mass of public discussion about trans people, in print, on social media and online forums, on the airwaves, in professional forums and public meetings. The public discussion is strong on polemic but weak on basic information about transitions and trans lives. This information is available. The experience of a variety of trans groups has now been documented in good-quality research. There is information, too, about how the medical profession, the state, and various political forces have engaged with trans lives, and how trans groups have organized themselves.

The most influential ideas in this discussion come from the global North, especially the USA. But most trans groups actually live in the post-colonial, majority world. Any attempt to understand transition and the issues around it must take careful account of their experience. I have tried to do that by including narratives, research, and ideas from different parts of Latin America, parts of sub-Saharan Africa, South and South-East Asia, parts of the Islamic world and Oceania, as well as from North America and Europe. The ways gender transitions are made, the societies in which they happen, and the groups that form, differ in many ways and cannot be reduced to variations on a global-North story. But they also have points in common, and often face parallel problems; there is good reason to think about them together. 'Trans' is not an ideal name to collect them, but I haven't found any better.

I hope to make a case for solid social realism about trans lives. We need realism to counter hostile fantasies, and to respond to reasonable questions. I think, too, we need to move beyond the emphasis on identities, norms and transgression that has been central to discussions of trans lives in English-speaking countries for the past twenty to thirty years. In recent years, more activists and researchers have addressed the practical issues of trans life such as poverty and precarity, the impact of racism, migration and colonization, and the role of violence and state power.

I build on this approach, not ignoring identity problems but trying to give a more rounded account of what gender transitions involve, and the powerful institutions and social forces that shape trans lives. Among the institutions I give particular attention to medicine and health professions for their part in shaping public understandings of gender transition as well as for their practical role. Anti-trans politics too needs careful thought. I trace the emergence of several groups of opponents, the stories they circulate and the tools they use. But I also emphasize the capacity of trans groups to respond to circumstances and shape pathways in life.

And I want to bring gender itself, gender as a social structure and a pattern in personal life, back robustly into the discussion of transitions and trans groups. I have no hesitation in speaking of transsexual women and men, and feminized trans groups such as *travestis* and *hijra*, as well as transgender, nonbinary and intersex. The popularity of gender-neutral terms like 'transgender community' and 'LGBT', and a certain nervousness about 'the binary', have the curious effect of de-gendering the way we talk about many groups for whom gender matters a lot. For whom gender can be, in fact, a matter of life and death.

I hope to provide information and ideas that will be useful to trans people themselves, and to people who engage with them as family, partners, friends or supporters, professionals or policymakers. More broadly, I hope to provide an understanding of gender transition and what it involves, for anyone who is thinking about the issues raised by trans groups' existence.

The book is in three parts. The first concerns trans lives and gender transitions. [Chapter 1](#) introduces seven trans groups from different countries, and several from the internet, using close-focus research from the last two generations. [Chapter 2](#) considers people who are *not* trans, and how to understand gender itself. [Chapter 3](#) looks at what is involved in gender transitions, the work they require, and the people who do it.

The second part looks at the wider environment of trans lives. [Chapter 4](#) discusses the doctors and health care, and what happened as trans medicine went commercial and global. [Chapter 5](#) outlines the social structures and major institutions that shape trans lives. [Chapter 6](#) looks at hostility to trans groups, especially the recent anti-trans campaigns and violence.

The third part returns to trans groups themselves. [Chapter 7](#) looks at the varied and inventive ways trans groups have organized and tried to change their worlds. The book ends with a short reflection on the book's themes and the contribution trans groups can make towards a more just, peaceful and survivable world.

Any book of this scope rests on the work of many activists and researchers. I have listed my sources in the endnotes to each chapter, and I really encourage readers to follow up at least some of them, to get closer to the experiences themselves. I would like to record my deep gratitude to Viviane Namaste, who opened so many of these paths; Rose

Leontini, who revealed the international medical literature for me; Jesse Hooley and Sophie Cotton, who brought me up to date with the political struggle; Michael Messner, for long friendship and advice on this project; Patricia Selkirk, for technical advice and even longer friendship; and Kylie Benton-Connell, whose unflinching judgement and unfailing support have made this work possible. The book is dedicated to Kylie.

For trans women, telling one's story, accounting for oneself, is constantly required. It is sometimes valuable, sometimes humiliating, sometimes dangerous. When planning this book I wanted to avoid the personal-story mode, both to resist that pressure, and because the story is not only mine. In particular Pam Benton, whose partner I was for twenty-nine years, cannot give her own account; she was a writer and would have done that. But I accept that it may be important for readers of this book to know where the author is coming from, and what stake I have in these issues.

So: I am a transsexual woman, now in my eighties and looking with some amazement at what the years brought. I am Australian, from a white settler-colonial family who migrated to this continent during the British invasion in the nineteenth century. I was born during World War II, grew up in the postwar boom, and have never been in poverty. I worked as a full-time academic, mostly in Australia, for more than forty years. I am a social scientist, and I have done research on questions about gender as well as class, education, the global economy of knowledge, and other problems. I am still a member of my union. I am a socialist and feminist, and, unlike the Australian government, I believe in environmental sanity.

I ran into gender contradictions in childhood, coming to know myself as a girl, while also knowing I had a boy's

body. In Australia in the 1950s there were no services concerned with such matters. I tried to live as a boy and a man, pushing the alternative down by willpower. By late adolescence I was in serious trouble with horror and self-harm, close to suicide. Not unusual for trans women! In early adulthood I met and fell in love with Pam; we formed a relationship that turned my life in another direction. By trial and error we arrived at ways of living together that could include both Pam's commitment to women as an active feminist and my identification with women. We became parents and shared the joys and trials of raising our daughter. Looking back, my part seems like a long, rocky attempt at gender hybridity; but that ended. Pam died, after a hard struggle with breast cancer, in her fifties. After intense grief, I could not restart the hybrid way of living. Now needing to complete the transition, I undertook medical reassignment, which is no holiday in the sun but does change embodiment in helpful ways. Strong support from my family, and from friends and colleagues, made the transition possible. There were losses, of course, but new friendships became possible, and new ways of connecting to the world.

I have privileges of class, race and nationality. They made it possible for me to travel and to study, and so learn about trans situations different from my own. I have visited and talked with trans activists in twelve countries, and collected information in various languages, some of which I can read. I have some other resources for this work, particularly experience in field research on gender issues, and familiarity with theory. This background has led me to a critical view of some widespread ideas about trans lives and politics. Other voices too are calling for new thinking in this field, which has become more urgent with the upsurge of anti-trans politics and continued violence.

I don't have a cut-and-dried strategy to propose, and I won't be around to see the long-term effects; but I have faith in the energy and creativity of trans groups. Good information and wider perspectives should help them to survive this hard time, and build beyond it. I hope this book will contribute to the work.

1

Real Lives

To understand gender transition and the issues it raises, it is vital to learn about the people most affected, the lives they live, and the situations they face. Regrettably, many commentators who hold strong views about trans issues never do this work. Yet it is not hard. You don't even need to go out in the rain, since there is a whole library of research about trans people and groups, much of it available online.

This research comes in several styles. Most abundant are the reports of biomedical studies, usually published in technical journals, about topics from hormones and surgery to genetics and statistical studies of populations. There are also reports and case studies by psychiatrists, naturally concerned with mental health. There are various surveys of trans groups, now mostly conducted online, and surveys of opinions held by the wider population. There are studies by historians, political scientists and media researchers exploring government policies and public controversies. There is also a small body of close-focus fieldwork by anthropologists and sociologists. This ethnographic research gives the fullest picture of the situations trans groups face and the ways they respond, so it is the basis of this opening chapter. I will be using the other research in the later chapters.

In this chapter I introduce trans groups from seven face-to-face studies, plus studies of several online forums. I have chosen good-quality research from a range of cultures, including at least five different language backgrounds.

Since trans experiences change, I have tried to include as wide a time-span as possible. The data collection in these studies was carried out at different points between 1981 and 2021; two of them have evidence that reaches back to the 1950s. The chapter presents them in approximate chronological order.

Montréal, Canada: 1955-85

It is not easy to recover the experience of a stigmatized group forgotten by conventional history. In a fascinating project, Viviane Namaste weaves together oral-history interviews with survivors, news, advertisements and images from the popular press of the time, plus documents from court and administrative archives. From this she reconstructs the life, work and environment of trans women in Montréal in the generation when a transsexual community and collective identity were forming.

Montréal, the largest city in the mainly French-speaking province of Québec, had a population of around 2 million at the time. Formerly the main industrial and financial centre in Canada, it shared in the postwar economic boom. In the 1950s the province was controlled by a very conservative Catholic government. In the 1960s a cautious Liberal Party came to power, after which public welfare, health and education services expanded. The city's wealth sustained a semi-legal night economy of entertainment, drinking and sex work, and it was in venues such as bars, night clubs and particularly cabarets that a transvestite and transsexual presence crystallized.

Cross-dressing is an old practice in theatre, going back before Shakespeare's time. It was a familiar item in music-hall entertainment, and became a feature of Montréal's sophisticated postwar cabaret scene. Successful transvestite singers, dancers and comediennes could

become celebrities in cabaret from the 1940s. By the early 1960s whole revues with a trans cast were being staged. There were no secure jobs in this; the show girls moved around from venue to venue. But with many venues available, they could earn a living.

By the end of the 1960s a small trans workforce had formed in this setting. Since their performances attracted an audience of men, and by spending time with the customers they helped sell overpriced liquor, and by making assignations combined entertainment with sex work, they were an asset to the owners of the venues. The performers gained respect from the criminal networks who controlled the night economy and provided them with a certain amount of protection from inner-city violence.

What their work produced was a display of sexualized femininity, scandalous but intriguing to men in a repressive, patriarchal culture. A significant proportion of the performers, though not all, wanted to make a gender transition and be recognized as women. In the 1950s no medical services for transition were available in Canada. But as trans women such as the American Christine Jorgensen and the French singer Coccinelle became famous, knowledge about transition circulated informally. This included information about hormones and silicone (coming into use in cosmetic surgery at the time), and where to get them on the black market. Breast augmentation became more important to performers when 'topless' shows became common in the late 1960s.

Formal medical services became available in a chaotic way. Individual plastic surgeons offered breast implants. A gender identity clinic was opened in nearby Toronto in 1969, and several clinics were established in Québec in the 1970s. But when the medical authorities created an official category for 'change of sex' procedures, it paradoxically

became more difficult to obtain reassignment surgery. The government would pay, but the amount granted would not cover basic surgical costs, and availability of operating rooms remained a problem for many years. During the 1960s and early 1970s, the legal position of surgeons performing genital surgery was risky.

In fact the whole scene was risky, under the surveillance of state agencies and conservative church groups which were hostile to trans existence. Initially the police made little distinction between homosexuality, cross-dressing and sex change. For a male to wear women's clothes in the street was illegal, so performers could be arrested when simply going home from work. Trans women were insulted and bashed in police stations. If they had jobs in the mainstream economy, police might inform their employers and get them sacked. In a 1973 case where a trans woman was murdered, the man - who maintained he had never met the woman he allegedly killed and did not know she was trans - was acquitted. Testimony from the barmen that the man and woman had previously met, and that the woman's trans status was known to the accused, was ignored. Sex work had long been criminalized, and from time to time the city authorities mounted campaigns to stamp it out, for instance during the international exposition Expo67. Trans sex workers were particularly targeted in clean-up campaigns.

Yet state repression was unsystematic. In the 1960s it was easy for some trans women to get identity documents in a feminine name if the parish priest agreed to modify the church registry. These documents allowed them to travel and to open bank accounts. Later, the administration was tightened and the documents became harder to get. Some judges were hostile, while other judges refused to convict on what they regarded as trivial charges. After homosexuality was decriminalized by the national

parliament in 1969, persecution of trans women by police diminished, but did not end.

A historical study is necessarily concerned with time and change. By the 1970s and early 1980s, trans women in Montréal were better off legally and had better medical services. They were also gaining a sense of common ground. The night economy had provided meeting places and circuits of information, and perhaps a heightened sense of shared interests. Clearer distinctions were now being drawn between gay men and trans women, especially with the 1970s turn to masculinized style in many gay men's self-presentation.

Namaste thus traces the steps by which a *collective* trans-feminine identity was emerging. In the 1970s and 1980s political steps were being taken too: lobbying government, and mounting court cases to assert civic rights. It was not a revolution. Yet trans women's capacity for action, already visible in the cabaret scene and in resistance to police harassment, was being asserted in new ways. That was needed, because the early 1980s saw a new presence on the scene: the human immunodeficiency virus and AIDS.

Sydney, Australia: 1981-2

A vivid picture of another trans community in formation began as an essay for an undergraduate course in anthropology. Roberta Perkins, the author, went on to deepen it as a graduate student and then expand it into a book. (I knew the author, and launched her book – an event that many participants in her study came to, and enjoyed.)

The core of the study was long life-history interviews that Perkins conducted, in their homes, with twelve trans women from the groups she had met in an inner-city setting: show girls, strippers, bar girls and street

prostitutes. In the book's main chapters she presented extracts from these tape-recorded interviews, describing the social world of each of the four groups. The picture was filled out with dozens of shorter interviews with others in the scene – including some of the male customers – plus observations from months in the bars and coffee shops and on the streets of King's Cross in Sydney.

Sydney was the point of entry for the British invasion of Australia and the South Pacific, from 1788. It started as the headquarters of a network of penal settlements, then became a trading town exporting fur, wool, gold and wheat, eventually a manufacturing and service city. In the early 1980s it had a population of more than 3 million and was still changing. Perkins's book paints a lively portrait of an old bohemian inner suburb in decay, being transformed by brash new money, ruthless developers, tourism, and corrupt politics.

Most of the trans participants came from working-class backgrounds, a few from the middle class. Their stories tell of early commitments to femininity – 'I always wanted to be a girl' – rejecting the interest in sports and toughness usually expected of Australian boys. Their paths into adulthood were varied, and led to different forms of trans embodiment. Some had gone through a full medical reassignment, including genital surgery ('the operation' had been available for a few in Australia since 1965). Others had made limited body changes by taking oestrogens, having surgical breast enhancements, or electrolysis to remove body hair. All had cross-dressed, and that was often the trigger for social reactions: family disapproval, unemployment and poverty.

Entering the King's Cross scene, the night economy of the inner city, was largely a matter of survival. Sex work and drag shows could provide an income, however precarious.

They also provided social support, as new entrants learnt from fellow workers how to manage life as a trans woman. For a lucky few the scene did better, providing friendship, prestige and even celebrity as a successful stage performer or a mother-figure for younger trans women.

Perkins notes that 'the girls', to use their own term, generally accepted without criticism the narrow definitions of femininity and masculinity and the middle-class aspirations familiar in Australian society. They also, crucially, accepted that a male body properly went with masculinity. Their own moves towards femininity thus made trouble from the start: not only conflict with families, peer groups and schools, but also conflict in their own minds, producing guilt, fear and uncertainty.

The pressure towards conventional femininity came partly from within, but also from without. The girls had no autonomous base. The drag queen scene was sustained economically by a flow of customers, overwhelmingly men in search of sexual pleasure, titillation or excitement, not to mention alcohol. The men generally held a stereotype of a desirable woman: pretty, sexy, young and compliant. Interacting on those terms, from a poor bargaining position, meant that the girls could expect large doses of arrogance, crude and abusive language and sometimes physical abuse. Their general opinion of men was low.

The distinctions between show girls, strippers, bar girls and street prostitutes were basically economic. This was a hierarchy of income and relative security, with show girls at the top, street workers at the bottom. This was also a gradient of respect, or more exactly a gradient of contempt and exposure to public abuse, police harassment, and violence, all of which were worst for the street sex workers. The workers were finally driven off their recognized street,

not long after the interviews with Perkins, by a political and police campaign to 'clean up' the area.

Perkins writes often of a 'scene', sometimes of a 'subculture', rarely of a 'community', the collective noun commonly used today. Even if we call this a subculture, we have to acknowledge that it was economically divided, persistently troubled by the guilt and anxiety that were chronic in trans existence at the time, and justifiably fearful of the contempt and violence of the wider society. Yet the subculture had achieved a certain reputation in Sydney's urban life. Tourists from overseas and clients from the suburbs and the bush came in to see the show. This situation was different from the fugitive moments of trans existence in the 1950s that older informants could remember. The book documents examples of cooperation and support that suggest how such a fragile social grouping could persist. There was even an attempt by a group of the show girls to unionize and go on strike. It was unsuccessful. But it is worth noticing that a mainly working-class group in the 1970s and 1980s would have been more familiar with strong unions and militant industrial action than an equivalent group today.

San Francisco, Boston and New York, USA: 1994-5

The doctors who developed the new transsexual medicine in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s were convinced that there were far more 'male-to-female' transsexuals than 'female-to-male'. This undoubtedly reflected the gender balance among those who knocked at their doors asking for treatment, but perhaps it also reflected cultural assumptions. In a society that privileged men, it was a man seeking a sex change who was the more scandalous. Women wanting to be treated as men were

more familiar: there had been suffragettes and bluestockings, there were working-class women who cross-dressed to do men's jobs, there were women athletes. There were lesbian scenes where one could dress and act in a masculine style towards more feminine partners – in American slang, one could be a butch.

Nevertheless some female-to-male (FTM) transsexuals had been recognized by the doctors. From the 1970s their numbers were growing. This change is a basis of the argument in Henry Rubin's notable study of transsexual men. Rubin did useful archival research on the shaky way medical treatment for FTM transsexuals had evolved. The core of his study, however, was long life-history interviews with twenty-two transsexual men, met via transgender activism, lesbian networks, and the queer bars, cafés and sex clubs of several northern cities of the United States in the mid-1990s. New York and Boston were both large cities with colonial and industrial histories and racially divided populations. San Francisco, the boom town of the nineteenth-century gold rushes, was now the hub of the Bay Area, with its deep divisions between wealth and poverty. San Francisco and New York were seen at the time as the main US centres of gay and lesbian culture.

From these life stories Rubin became convinced of two basic facts: the power of the interviewees' core identity as a man, and the importance of the body as a site of contradiction and struggle. Rubin paid more attention to the whole life-history than most researchers did, and he found a common shape in most (though not all) of his interviewees' narratives.

They began in an untroubled childhood, taking pleasure and developing skill in boys' activities such as riding BMX bikes, either thinking of oneself as a boy or simply feeling distant from conventional girlhood. There was a benign

name for this in white American culture: a girl could be a 'tomboy'. She was expected to grow out of it, especially after puberty. Rubin's interviewees did not follow this part of the script. For them, puberty was not just a time of change, it was a shocking betrayal by their own bodies. In particular, menstruation and the growth of breasts signalled embodiment as a woman. This was inescapable, but in flat contradiction to a sense of self as a boy or man.

So the usual embarrassments of adolescence were brought to an unbearably high pitch. Here the stories diverged, following different strategies for living with a detested female embodiment. Some withdrew as far as they could from teenage social life, becoming isolates. Some started to think they were lesbians. Some gritted their teeth and hid in conventional femininity, trying to pass as heterosexual young women and hoping the storm would blow over. Doubtless for many former tomboys the storm did blow over, but for these interviewees it did not. They had to deal with the 'absolute intransigence', as Rubin puts it, of their core male identity.

After various roadblocks and detours, the narratives finally arrived at a possible resolution. They discovered gender transition, sometimes by meeting transsexual men or women. Rubin speaks of this as formulating a specifically transsexual identity. He emphasizes that what followed was not a sudden change but a multi-step process that enacted and then consolidated a gender transition.

Given the importance of bodies in defining gender in American culture, as well as the embodied crisis of puberty these young men had been through, the process centred on bodily change. Transsexual medicine had not, and still has not, produced a strongly defined treatment package for FTM transition. However, two procedures were common and important in these narratives: being treated with