

Editorial

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Transgender studies and theories: building up the field in a Nordic context

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On 18 November 2009, Linköping University, Sweden opened its doors to what we believe to be the first international conference on trans in the Nordic region. Three busy, inspiring, challenging days later the ‘Transgender studies and theories: building up the field in a Nordic context’ conference ended. This special issue (bearing the same name as the conference) is an attempt to capture a flavour of those three days and to share it with a wider audience, in the hope of continuing the conversations and sparking new debates.

The conference participants and presenters included academics, activists and artists from many countries, from many disciplines and with a wide range of interests. The scope

of the conference was kept deliberately open in terms of the participants we hoped to attract and the topics for inclusion. The aim in doing this was two-fold: to provide a space for different perspectives and experiences to meet in dialogue and, in so doing, to challenge the primacy of any one form of knowledge production on trans persons and lives.

The six articles that follow were developed from papers presented at the conference. They reflect the richness of the research and activism being carried out by and with trans persons at the conference and hence reflect some of the discussions going on. The strong, proud, smiling transmerperson which appears on the cover of this special issue productively connects the ac-

ademic, activist and artistic contributions which defined the conference. However, it also points towards the creativity which runs through this issue. This creativity is clear not only in the papers specifically dealing with art and new media, but also in the innovative intersections and approaches which characterize the articles that follow.

In order to try and reflect the rich variety of contributions to both the conference and this special issue, the majority of this editorial will be devoted to introducing the articles themselves, the book reviews and the thoughts of some of our conference attendees on 'building up the field in a Nordic context'. Our closing words, rather than trying to definitively state what this 'field' might look like, reflect the hopes we have for the future and our heartfelt thanks to the people who have helped to make this special issue come to life. So, without further ado...

This issue opens – just as the conference itself did – with a welcome from Nina Lykke, Professor of Gender Studies with special reference to Gender and Culture at the Unit for Gender Studies, TEMA - Department of Thematic Studies, Linköping University, Sweden. This welcome, which we have printed here almost exactly as it was given, explicitly advocates further development of a mutually supportive and productive

intra-action between gender studies and transgender studies – apt words indeed with which to open this issue which we hope will produce many fruitful transdisciplinary conversations. This short piece is followed by six articles and four book reviews.

The first article is an essay on transgender children, written by Natacha Kennedy and Mark Hellen. This topic is not much discussed in academia or in more 'everyday' settings such as school, social work or health care. Kennedy and Hellen's research on the topic, which builds on a survey of transgender adults asked about their childhoods, shows that transgender children are aware of their gender variance much earlier than has been previously thought. Transgender children internalize a negative self-image due to their gender variance, and most children don't have access to words that can explain their feelings. This article underlines the importance of knowledge and support for transgender children, recommending that: 'as a minimum, schools introduce children to the concept of transgender people, so that transgender children are able to feel they are not alone and that their gender identity is as valid as any other' (Kennedy & Hellen, this issue).

This experience of othering, and the accompanying lack of words to express these feelings in childhood, is also articulated in the next paper by Austrian artist Anthony Clair Wagner. Wagner eloquently describes

the experience of being lost and then finding a voice through artistic expression. Wagner describes the powerful potential that can be found in the figures of the cyborg and the monster, and follows Susan Stryker's suggestion to imagine monsters as 'messengers and heralds of the extraordinary' (Stryker 2006, 247). Both of these figures (the monster and the cyborg) together with two developed by Wagner – the beast and the elf – are evoked in this article, and through art the message of future gender variance is embodied. The possibilities these hybrid figures offer are illustrated with examples from Wagner's own art as well as that of other artists.

Jules Tamàs Fütty provides a reflective and intersectional investigation into transgender theory in the third essay. Dichotomies are questioned and deconstructed, and both academic and non-academic perspectives in relation to transgender context(s) mentioned. This essay highlights and reflects upon the concept of passing and its paradoxical effects, i.e. that it simultaneously destabilizes and fixes power relations. Passing is also discussed in relation to articulating, silencing and othering, and highlights the underlying processes of power relations. As academics in this field we would like the following words from this article to guide accountable research on transgender issues: 'normalizing and silencing practices within Western research on transgender

need to be reflected upon critically with regards to their practices of negotiating and authorizing meanings, which are both in danger of reproducing norms and silencings, but which can also enable subversions and interruptions' (Tamàs Fütty, this issue).

The next essay, by Ute Kalender, develops an intersectional trans-crip perspective. In doing this Kalender draws upon the significance of new reproductive technologies for both transgender people and people with disabilities. Issues such as forced sterilization, new reproductive technologies and accessibility are raised in this investigation of the underlying norms that operate within trans and crip approaches to reproduction. It is also stressed that each of these perspectives has ignored the meanings and consequences of debates on this issue in the other field of interest. Consequently, trans perspectives miss out on the problematic issue of neo-eugenics and the underlying norms that are reproduced through this, while crip perspectives may fail to acknowledge issues of sexuality and gender. With these gaps in mind, Kalender stresses the importance of integrating these two perspectives, and suggests some future directions.

In the fifth essay, Erika Alm's "Contextualising Intersex: Ethical discourses on Intersex in Sweden and the US", a comparison is made between the debates on intersex in the US and Sweden, highlighting

the difference in engagement with intersex advocacy and feminist perspectives. In the US there has been an explicit ethical debate on intersex rights, partly due to ISNA's (Intersex Society of North America) work. In Sweden, however, this debate has been rather silent. Alm also stresses the lack of a feminist studies perspective in the Swedish debate, which in the US has been influential for the intersex debate. The article argues that the debate on intersex rights must integrate perspectives from clinicians and caretakers, as well as intersex advocacy and feminist perspectives.

Finally, Tobias Raun develops an interpretation of visual gender transitions on the Internet, especially in video blogs (vlogs) on Youtube. He calls these 'screen births', as he understands the trans vlogs as both vehicles for the transformative embodiment of self-identified gender identities, and also as co-constitutive, as identity is expressed and emerges through the vlogs. Just as Wagner's reclaimed hybridity contains a message of future gender variance, Raun's essay on vlogs represents computer technology as a vehicle for global activism, and as such containing a transformative potential and expression of a global hope for future gender variance.

The books reviewed in this issue also pick up on the transgender

theme.

Nora Koller highlights the philosophical perspectives on change and identity presented in "You've changed": *Sex reassignment and Personal Identity*, edited by Laurie J. Shrage. The inherent difficulties and tensions between essential and relational experiences and expressions of the self, as well as between materiality and experience pose questions about what is actually changed and what stays the same in lived transitional experiences.

Leslie Sherlock reviews the book *Two Truths and a Lie* by Scott Turner Schofield, which is a written version of three pieces of live performances, and finds it as beautiful on the page as it is on stage. Sherlock also highlights its difference from other trans biographical literature, especially in the emphasis on embracing difference. She further highlights Schofield's discussion of coming out as both a transgender process but also coming out as a home-coming queen and debutante.

Natasha Curson reviews *Transgender Identities: Towards a Social Analysis of Gender Diversity*, edited by Sally Hines and Tam Sanger, noting that it contains a number of insightful and promising articles, but also some articles which use outdated or questionable terminology. The intention of the book is articulated as 'a reinstatement of materiality' and the engagement in experienced lives of trans people is, according to Curson, a theme for many of the

chapters in the book.

Eliza Steinbock describes the book *Assuming a Body: Transgender and the Rhetorics of Materiality*, by Gayle Salamon, as ‘a fine example of scholarship that accomplishes trans- and inter-disciplinary engagement’. Steinbock stresses the importance of the book’s focus on transdisciplinary perspectives of the body-concept in relation to transgender embodiment and materiality, through a transsectional use and analysis of trans studies, phenomenology, psychoanalysis, queer theory, sexual difference feminism, and judicial discourse, and their conceptions of the body. As the materiality of the body is discussed from the perspective of rhetoric, Steinbock also highlights the use of the concept of ‘the body’, as, for example, the lived body as well as ‘bodies of knowledge,’ in these different disciplines.

The title of the conference ‘Transgender studies and theories: building up the field in a Nordic context’ was deliberately chosen in order to frame this event as a starting point, rather than in any way providing a definitive snapshot of what a ‘Nordic trans field’ might look like. Appropriately enough, participants came from all over Europe and beyond, bringing their knowledge and experiences to the table. We wanted to capture something of that same

‘starting point’, scary, exciting, hairs-on-the-back-of-your-neck-standing-on-end feeling that this polyphonic meeting produced, so we asked three of our participants (keynote speakers Gayle Salamon and Del LaGrace Volcano, and future directions panel participant, Lukas Romson) for their thoughts following the conference...

Gayle Salamon

It is hard to resist imagining Sweden as the displaced origin of a certain strain of trans history in the United States. We learn from Joanne Meyerowitz in her book *How Sex Changed* (2004) that Sweden was Christine Jorgensen’s destination in 1952 when she left the United States in order to transition, and that a stopover in Copenhagen to visit relatives extended that stay so that she lingered in Denmark, ended up working with Dr. Christian Hamburger in Copenhagen, and never arrived in Sweden. It seems particularly fitting that Sweden, which appears in the trans history of the mid-twentieth century as a never-arrived-at stopping point, an infinitely deferred terminus, now finds itself as a new origin for a contemporary iteration of trans studies.

This conference brought together an impressive breadth of current research on Nordic transgender. As Paisley Currah and Dean Spade have recently argued in ‘The State We’re In: Locations of Coercion and Resistance in Trans Policy,’ trans-

gender studies is currently in need of exactly this kind of 'grounded approach' which 'firmly locates in the research the particular social locations transgender people inhabit' (2007, 3). Such 'taking transgender lives as the starting point, the research question is no longer the riddle of gender or the particular gender configurations of transgender individuals; instead, the problem to be solved becomes the social and legal arrangements that structure gender nonconformity as problematic in the first place' (Currah & Spade 2007, 3). The specific social, legal, and policy structures that shape the lives of transpeople in and around Sweden were examined from a number of different, culturally specific vantage points.

Adrian de Silva traced a genealogy of the trans subject back through German sexology, noting the ways in which gender and sexuality have been entwined and separated in the construction of transsexual and transvestite subjects. Peter Forsberg examined the Church of Sweden's support for practices of eugenic sterilization, and the legacy of that support in transsexual legislation from 1972, which requires that transpeople relinquish their reproductive capacity in what Forsberg terms a 'corporeal tax.' Jan-Olov Madeline Agren and Kerstin Burman looked at gender in the application of the Swedish Names Act. Jens Borcharding and Lukas Romson examined the role of Scandi-

navian political forms in the lives of transpeople. Erika Alm used an explicitly comparative approach, looking at intersex in Swedish and North American contexts. And Tobias Raun's work on the function of video weblogs in the production and dissemination of transgender identity offered a global mapping; he suggests that on YouTube, the camera enacts a transubstantiation in which gendered identity, and transgendered community, is made across and beyond particular national borders, creating a trans community that is also necessarily transnational.

Though the conference situated transgender within a distinctly Nordic context, it seems likely that the impact of the research shared there will find itself also travelling beyond the particularity of that context.

INTERSEXtions— Del LaGrace Volcano

Transgender Studies, a new and exciting field in academia owes much to queer theory, feminism and lesbian/gay studies, which in turn are all entirely dependent upon binary gender categories for their existence. 'Identity politics' are no longer in favour with the queer elite, 'so last century', or so I've been told. However I argue that there is still very much a need for a politics of identity and visibility in this century, particularly when it comes to the last letter of the acronymic alphabet soup, we call LGBTQ and

sometimes-I.

I stands for Intersex but could just as easily signify invisibility. There has been (and continues to be) a history of violent erasure of the intersexed, perpetrated in large part by a medical establishment that sees normalization (genital mutilation) as the solution. It has only been in the past ten years or so that intersex has become legible as a concept in contemporary society due to the increasing visibility in the mainstream media. The controversy surrounding the South African athlete, Caster Semenya, was reported throughout the world and provided a painful lesson about the racialization of gender and how much there is yet to achieve. In the early 00s there was best selling novel, *Middlesex*, appearances on *Oprah*, an award winning feature film, *XXY*, inclusion in popular television dramas from *ER* to *Law & Order* and numerous film and television documentaries, most of which were flawed and inaccurate but at least brought the subject to the table. However most people still have no idea what intersex means, unless you say the magic word, *hermaphrodite*. It seems we are only legible as mythological beasts, monstrosities or as useful tools in the fight to 'trouble' gender.

Simply put, intersex is anyone born with a body – or has a body that develops – outside of what are considered to be the standard norms for male and female bodies. Standards that have been arbitrarily sanc-

tioned by medical and legal institutions throughout the world. While the controversies and tensions surrounding nomenclature within the various intersex social movements and between intersex and transgender activist groups contain elements of destruction I believe that these debates have a transformative potential if only we find the will to grasp it.

My contribution to the 'Transgender studies and theories: building up the field in a Nordic context' conference was a visual lecture *RePresenting Intersex in Art, Culture & Everyday Life*. My primary objective was to demonstrate how gender and sexuality have been regulated through fear of the 'abnormally' gendered body across the ages and to provide an alternative perspective that empowers rather than colonizes. The spectre and spectacle of the hermaphrodite has been simultaneously exploited for entertainment, from the freak shows of old to modern day tabloid tv and employed to create a class of people against whom all others are judged, i.e. normal vs abnormal.

The borderlands between transgender and intersex are minefields of mis-information and distrust, often due to the unfortunate tendency of some people (trans and non trans alike) to appropriate intersex issues in ways that do not benefit intersex people. Until we are able to understand that it is *culture* which is gender dysphoric, not individuals, it will

be difficult to make significant progress.

Building up the field of Transgender Studies in Scandinavia – a challenge – Lukas Romson

This conference showed that there's a great deal of interest in Transgender Studies in the Nordic countries. What many years ago was a field only for psychologists and physicians who wanted to know more about the 'freaks' and how to 'cure' us, Transgender Studies is now also a field for researchers in many disciplines, from anthropology to theology.

I think diversity in research, as in other contexts, is important for getting results. Therefore, I think it's important to try even more to broaden the field of Transgender Studies, and to build cooperation between disciplines. With good contacts between researchers from different disciplines as well as different countries, the field will grow stronger. To be able to do that, researchers have to lay aside distrust, both between disciplines and between the humanities and natural sciences. I also think it's important to understand that Gender Studies is not the same as Transgender Studies, just as GLB-Studies are not limited to sexology. New thoughts and ideas grow best when watered by many. That will be one of the biggest challenges, to see honestly and handle the conflicts that will come up when trying to truly work interdisciplinarily.

The other challenge is to find resources, resources for conferences, for a database and for publications. These things are necessary to spread results, to share ideas and for the results and thoughts to reach the rest of society. For me, as a politician and a transactivist, this last aspect is my main focus. In a complex society with contradictory wills, hierarchies and unequal circumstances, basic data for decision-making presented by researchers are a fundamental requirement for democratic decisions which can give trans people equal rights. By using research reports from acknowledged researchers trans people can win respect and be given a voice – on condition that we can find and use these reports.

This leads me to the final, and most important, challenge: communication with the trans community. This is important so that we can find and use the research, but also so that we can have a chance to speak up if the research is harmful. Regardless of whether you yourself identify as transgender or not, checking your terminology, thesis, methods, sources and so on with a couple of well-established local transgender leaders in your country is a good way to ensure that your research will not harm anyone in the transcommunity. In return, it's the responsibility of the transcommunity to give something back, such as information, sources and respondents, as well as to spread your final

work in the transcommunity. If you as researcher do not find any trans-organisation in your country, contact TransGender Europe (<http://www.tgeu.org/>).

Many of the discussions during the conference showed what great interest there is in cooperation over boundaries. There will always be conflicts and distrust, both between different trans groups and different researchers and disciplines, as well as between researchers and trans people. But we have taken the first steps, and we will go on forward, together!

Final words and thanks

On that wonderfully positive note, we hope you find the articles that follow inspiring and thought-provoking. With texts like these to nourish future conversations, the emerging field(s) of trans studies and theories in the Nordic region will certainly be well-fed and watered.

The articles and reviews included here are but a taster of the wonderfully varied thinking and writing taking place on trans issues, both within the Nordic region and beyond. Whilst the conference was aimed at 'building up the field in a Nordic context', what the conference participants and contributors to this issue prove is that collaboration across fields, disciplines, languages, milieus and countries is a

central part of building up the many fields of trans studies and theories.

With that in mind, we would like to thank all the authors, book reviewers and anonymous peer reviewers who put their time and effort into making this issue come to life. Special thanks to Gwendolyn Beetham, Melissa Fernández Arrigoitia and Caroline Wamala of the GJSS, and also former editor, Mia Liinason, who guided us through the process. The cover design of this special issue (and the conference photography) was provided by Claire Tucker, and the illustration of the transmerperson was a wonderful, unexpected gift from Ka Schmitz (www.ka-comix.de) – we really appreciate you both giving your creative talents and time to this project.

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About the editors:

Katherine Harrison is a postdoctoral scholar at Unit of Gender Studies, TEMA - Department of Thematic Studies, Linköping University, Sweden. She recently completed her doctorate which explored the relationship between gender, discourse and technology. This exploration of these terms was then tested on a set of three case studies: cyberpunk fiction, infertility weblogs and biotechnology nomenclature. Katherine's current research project is ti-

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Ulrica Engdahl is a PhD student at Unit of Gender Studies, TEMA - Department of Thematic Studies Linköping University, Sweden. She will defend her thesis, which undertakes a feminist ethical discussion of the concepts of justice and recognition in relation to identity and identity politics in a trans*context, on 4 February 2011. The aim of it is to understand the interrelations between justice and recognition in expressions of identity- or groupbased injustices, which is often framed within a recognition setting. She formulates an enabling ethics of recognition which is also specified in a transcontextual meaning. She is currently working as an academic

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