

## **Trans as Contested Intelligibility**

Interrogating how to Conduct Trans Analysis with Respectful Curiosity

Raun, Tobias

*Published in:*  
Lambda Nordica

*Publication date:*  
2014

*Document Version*  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Raun, T. (2014). Trans as Contested Intelligibility: Interrogating how to Conduct Trans Analysis with Respectful Curiosity. *Lambda Nordica*, 1(2014), 13-37. [http://www.lambdanordica.se/wp-content/uploads/lambda1-14\\_art1.pdf](http://www.lambdanordica.se/wp-content/uploads/lambda1-14_art1.pdf)

### **General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain.
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal.

### **Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact [rucforsk@ruc.dk](mailto:rucforsk@ruc.dk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

TOBIAS RAUN

# Trans as Contested Intelligibility

Interrogating how to Conduct Trans Analysis  
with Respectful Curiosity

**I ADMIT IT.** Okay, there it is: I admit that this article grows out of being annoyed with the ways in which trans<sup>1</sup> identities and narratives have been, and still to a certain extent are, conceptualized and analyzed. And I admit that this annoyance is informed by my own positionality as a trans male identified researcher, who conducts research under the banner of transgender studies. "Trans" is thus a category or a label that I am inscribed and invested in, in many and intersecting ways. Or put differently, trans is a "sticky" sign saturated with affects (Ahmed 2004) for me as a person and as a researcher. However, as I will argue, this is not just the case for me, but for many gender studies scholars. This became apparent to me while I was conducting my virtual ethnographic studies on audiovisual trans storytelling in video blogs on YouTube (see Raun 2010; 2011; 2012a; 2012b; 2014), which let me to read and interrogate what has been written about trans identities/narratives within primarily gender studies. What I experienced in my reading, as well as through my virtual ethnographic studies, was that trans circulates as a particularly contested intelligibility, and as a site of personal, social, and theoretical tension.

Historically trans people have been (and still is in many countries) pathologized within a psycho-medical discourse/establishment, and

have been "dirty little outcasts of feminist and gay liberation discourses" (Stryker 2006a, 12). The claim has (among others) been that trans people are antifeminist, reproducing a rigid, stereotypical, and normative gender ideology/system that stands in the way of social change (Raymond 1979; Shapiro 1991), while gender-reassignment surgeries have been described as genital and bodily mutilation (Jeffreys 2005), caused by internalized homophobia (Jeffreys 2003, 137). Although one might say that this represents more historical views, they are not restricted to the past. In my experience (not least in a Nordic context) it is not uncommon to find different variations of these views both among the general public and among researchers, some of which even claim to speak from an unspecified feminist position. While it might be obvious for the readers of *lambda nordica* why I find these statements annoying, it might be less clear why I object to some of the readings that have been conducted by queer theoretically informed scholars. Taking my point of departure in three more recent studies on trans life-stories conducted by Katherine Johnson, Dag Heede, and Jodi Kaufmann, I want to pause on and explore what hopes and fears "sticks" to, or gets "stuck" in relation to trans as a category. What kind of promises are attached to trans – and what kind of ideologies of social change are invested in, and expected to be carried by, trans identities?

Taking into account that queer theory "remains the most hospitable place to undertake transgender work" (Stryker 2004, 214); it seems crucial to dwell on the actual analysis that has been conducted from a queer perspective. No doubt queer theory has played (and continues to play) an important role in shedding light on and revalorizing trans practices and identities, and has contributed extensively to a problematization of the relation between biological sex and gender identification, as well as pinpointing sex itself as a discursively informed construction (Butler 1990; 1993). But the premises for these endeavors are not always without a hitch, as I will argue.

I have chosen Johnson, Heede and Kaufmann as examples of what I see as widespread and problematic trends within *some* queer reading practices, studying trans life-story narratives. As examples they con-

dense and point out some of the fundamental issues that I want to address: Who is given voice and agency in the reading? What or who has to be revealed or deconstructed – and for whose sake? I will argue that Johnson, Heede and Kaufmann first and foremost are using the trans life-story narrative to “expose” heteronormative structures, which in all three cases (yet in different ways) results in an instrumentalized and truncated reading of trans. This forecloses a more complex and diverse understanding of trans and fails to include a critical reflection about who gets to speak for trans identity.

This leads me to my second disclaimer, thus this article does not just grow out of annoyance, but also out of a lived experience of being “re-oriented” or “redirected,” going through a social and medical transition, which made me extraordinarily aware of, and sensitive to, the politics of location and situated knowledges (Ahmed 2006, 5, 19–20). It is one thing to read about and cognitively understand cyberfeminist Donna Haraway’s claim that all scientific knowledge is situated and that all vision is embodied and yet another to *experience* that this is the case. To experience how one leaves a different impression on the world and how the world impress differently upon one. As affect and queer studies scholar Sara Ahmed touches upon but leaves unfolded: “Bodily transformations might transform what is experienced as delightful. If our bodies change over time, then the world around us will create different impressions.” (Ahmed 2010, 23) Now, I am not implying that going through a social and medical transition necessarily makes one a hyper aware human being, but it certainly has literalized within a fairly short span of time how my perceptions of the world are framed by my embodied and intersubjective self – and how that coproduce what I am oriented towards and what is experienced as “happy objects” to speak with Ahmed. And this effects how I conduct my research and what kind of analyzes I produce. I see things from more multiple and yet different and marked positions than I did or was capable of, before, making me sympathetic towards, but also slightly weary of some of my own previous readings. To speak with Haraway, “site” (location) and “sight” (vision) are closely connected and to position oneself and be aware from

where one speaks/sees might be what paradoxically promises objectivity in research practice. As Haraway writes:

The moral is simple: only partial perspective promises objective vision [...]. All Western cultural narratives about objectivity are allegories of the ideologies of the relations of what we call mind and body, of distance and responsibility, embedded in the science question in feminism. Feminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting of subject and object. (Haraway 1988, 583)

In line with the feminist epistemology of Donna Haraway, as well as transgender studies, I call for more studies with lived experiences as the focal point, acknowledging research as a "view from a body", even if that body is "a complex, contradictory, structuring, and structured body" (Haraway 1988, 589). I also call for ambivalent reading strategies that attempt to move beyond what I would call "dissecting" readings of personal trans narratives. I encourage readings where trans narratives/identities are not reduced to a matter of normative (re)production and/or subversive deconstruction. Or put differently, I want to problematize the epistemological output of and the methodological premises for certain types of queer analysis where questions of normativity and subversion often seem to be both *the* scope and *the* conclusion. This pursuit often seems to be propelled by a declared wish to conduct "critical" research. But the question is what becomes recognizable as critical research – and if the researcher can conduct the same kind of critical analysis on trans life-story narratives as on institutionalized homophobia or transphobia? I think these theoretical and methodological questions are important to raise in a Nordic context where they are rarely discussed at length on a scholarly level, perhaps because trans as a field of study is still fairly new.

### **Instrumentalizing Trans Life-Stories**

Katherine Johnson is a British researcher working within the field of psychology and social science. Her article "Changing Sex, Changing Self: Theorizing Transitions in Embodied Subjectivity", is an attempt

to theorize transsexual subjectivity and embodiment (Johnson 2007, 54) by using and referencing queer poststructuralist thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Judith Jack Halberstam, and Judith Butler. The overall aim is to explore themes related to shifts in self-perceptions, in light of radical changes in gender presentation, among a group of FTMs and MTFs she has interviewed (Johnson 2007, 55). When I initially came across the article I was thrilled, however reading the article left me with a lot of methodological questions and concerns. The article made me critically reflect on how researchers approach personal trans narratives, and explicitly or implicitly inscribe themselves in the analysis.

Johnson introduces several interviewees, but very few of them are given more than a couple of lines of presentation. From the interviews Johnson elicits two "constructions of selfhood", namely "being the same person" and "being a new person" (Johnson 2007, 56). Billy (a FTM, age forty-six) is initially cast as a representative of the self-perception of being the same person, while Caroline (a MTF, age twenty-nine) is a representative for those who self-identify as being a new person. The two of them are analytically constructed as schematically and coherent examples of one and the other, which then becomes a point of reference from which to "expose" the paradoxes in each narrative. As Johnson states:

Despite Caroline's essentialist claim to have a "female brain," she acknowledges that the successful manifestation of a gender identity is formulated through an ability to embody cultural practices of that gender: through learning and performing what it is to be a woman or man. (Johnson 2007, 64)

Johnson questions and contests the stories in various ways. As she argues:

Billy is not the same person doing the same thing. Being related to as a man and relating to others as a man, rather than as a woman, will inevitably affect his gender subjectivity. It is, after all, the reason for transitioning. (Johnson 2007, 57)

Not only does Johnson reject Billy's reluctance to identify with having changed gender subjectivity, but she also criticizes Caroline for actually fully identifying with being a new person. The concluding argument is that "for psychic health, it must be important to both accept and play with the inconsistencies in our self-narratives rather than attempting to merely iron out the creases" (Johnson 2007, 68). What seems to be neglected (even though it is the stated purpose of the article) is an analysis of the individual renegotiation of self and body, or why one of the tropes is used (maybe strategically) or feels right, and not the other. To explore what function these different narratives serve in these people's life-projects would not only be analytically interesting, but also allow for the individual story "to breathe."<sup>2</sup> This analytical strategy would also have made room for a certain degree of identification with the subjects, but that possibility is closed down by Johnson's reading. It strikes me that Johnson "others" the trans interviewees and specifically disidentifies herself with them, and assumes that the reader does the same. As Johnson states: "*We* might all feel that *we* are 'changing as a person,' but [...] *she* [Caroline] uses it to acknowledge a radical separation from her previous male gender identity." (Johnson 2007, 63) This "othering" is repeated several times, even when kinship is assumed: "[*T*he transsexual subject is entrenched in the very same process as *all of us*: striving for the effect of 'realness.'" (Johnson 2007, 65, my emphasis in all of the above) Carolyn is here singled out as *the* transsexual subject, which not only makes her a representative of some sort of rare species, but also distinguishes her from a general, normative and naturalized majority of non-trans "we" and "us."

In conclusion, Johnson's analysis is predominantly based on detecting, mapping, and revealing the gaps and contradictions in the stories being told. This is enhanced by the continuous and outspoken evaluations of the narratives and embodiments of the trans subjects.

What I would have wanted Johnson to do was to engage in analysis as somewhat of a dialogical interaction. A dialogical interpretative practice is informed by, and imbued with, ethical reflections, and entails that the researcher "takes particular interest in *learning from the storytellers*"

and not to finalize the story or the storyteller (Frank 2010, 17, 20, emphasis in original). The premise is (though often temporarily forgotten) that no one – and this includes the researcher – has the whole story. This is in line with some of the requests and contributions offered by transgender studies, acknowledging “the embodied experience of the speaking subject” as an important and essential component of the analysis of trans phenomena (Stryker 2006a, 12). Furthermore, a stronger focus on Johnson’s own biases could have contributed fruitfully to the analysis of the relationship between a story, a storyteller and a listener/researcher, heightening the awareness of “how *each allows the other to be*” (Frank 2010, 16, emphasis in original). I find it relevant to bear in mind transgender studies scholar Henry Rubin’s caution, given in connection with an interpretation of qualitative interviews touching on identity and embodiment among transsexual men:

We [researchers] must ask ourselves what it means that individuals feel like they have a “true self,” even if we accept the idea that (gender) identities are fictionalized constructs of our collective imagination. We should be wary of simple attempts to dismiss all experience as false consciousness. (Rubin 2003, 12)

### **Relying on Exposure and Subversion**

Dag Heede is a Danish researcher working within queer literary analysis and theory. His article “From ‘a real girl’ to ‘a pregnant man’”<sup>3</sup> takes its point of departure in two written trans autobiographies; the Danish Lili Elbe’s *Man into Women* (1931) and American Thomas Beatie’s *Labor of Love* (2008)<sup>4</sup> to discuss notions of (trans)gender and reproduction. However, *Man into Women* is only partially an autobiography and can maybe more correctly be characterized as a “hybrid text”, and as a “writing collaboration” between Elbe and the editor Niels Hoyer, as Scandinavian studies researcher Sabine Meyer discusses (Meyer 2011, 70).

Dag Heede has published other and extended readings of Elbe’s book elsewhere, e.g. in the Swedish anthology, *Queera läsningar* [*Queer Readings*] from 2012. The article “From ‘a real girl’ to ‘a pregnant man’” is not



presented as a queer theoretical reading *per se*; in fact, it seems rather up in air what theoretical and methodological "gaze" governs the reading. References are made to queer theoretical scholars like Don Kulick and Michael Warner, to the deconstructive thinker Jacques Derrida, but most of all to the Foucauldian feminist Bernice Hausman's work. Hausman has in critical terms theorized trans people's "dependence" on medical technology as a submission to a patriarchal and capitalist industry (Hausman 1995). Hausman's work has later been widely critiqued within transgender studies and from feminist philosopher Cressida Heyes, who argues that Hausman erases the agency and critical awareness of trans people (Heyes 2007, 39). This critique is however not present in Heede's presentation and use of Hausman.

Heede's article is based on a reading of Elbe and Beatie's claim of identity as "overstated and radically non-subversive" (Heede 2012, 14). Heede's prime conclusion is that both of these autobiographies articulate "ultra-conservative gender stereotypes" and "rigid heteronormativity", and both books are described as being overtly preoccupied with renouncing the category of the monster and instead holding on to "essentialism" and "(hyper) conventionalism" (Heede 2012, 14). I want to pause on the short analysis of *Labor of Love* that leads Heede to come to these conclusions. What is of special interest to me is the way Heede interprets Beatie's pregnancy. According to Heede the book is "devoid of philosophical and reflective passages" and "far less refined" than *Man into Women* (Heede 2012, 21). In other words the book is subjected to a value judgment, which might help explain why Heede does not leave room for a more nuanced and complex reading of the trans life-story narrative. Instead Heede seems preoccupied with "revealing" how Beatie constantly constructs himself as exclusively male. Beatie is according to Heede subscribing to the unambiguous category of man, husband and father. Beatie's male identity and his pregnancy therefore constitute, in Heede's interpretation, a "fundamental conflict". As illustration, Heede quotes the following passage from *Labor of Love*:

I was not switching back to being a female; I was still, in my mind, fully male. I've always felt that the desire to have a child is neither a male nor a female desire – it is a human one. So why not carry the child as a male? Why couldn't I be a pregnant man? (Heede 2012, 22)

I am wondering if the quote necessarily points to a "fundamental conflict" – and if so, is it a conflict in Beatie, or one imposed upon him by others? How can Heede "know" that Beatie is expressing an internal conflict, and not just being in discussion with societal norms about what male bodies are supposed to do and not do? In any case, Beatie seems to present a questioning of male pregnancy as an oxymoron. He is asking why carrying a baby per se is considered a feminizing act, thus trying to reformulate the assumed causal connection between certain (reproductive) bodily capacities and their gendered signifier. Read in this light, Beatie is not reproducing heteronormativity, but rather renegotiating what fatherhood could involve. Furthermore, it surprises me that Heede insist on labeling Beatie's capacity to carry children as having kept his "female reproductive organs" (Heede 2012, 21). How come that these organs have to be labeled "female"? Remembering Butler's problematization of the naturalization of sex, I am puzzled by Heede's reduction of body parts and organs to stable gendered positions. As Butler taught us, we should pay more attention to the language used and to our labeling of body parts/ functions, as these are performative iterations that (re)create the things and categories they are meant just to describe. One might say that to be aware of the power of language is especially important in the case of trans, as trans bodies are often not reducible to non-trans characterizations, either because these bodies look different or because individual trans people perceive and identify their bodies very differently, often relabeling body parts, or inventing new labels that seems more adequate.

On the one hand Heede distance himself from "trans phobic streams of 1970s feminism" (e.g., Janice Raymond), and highlights their disrespectful labeling of trans women as "she-males" (Heede 2007, 13). But on the other hand Heede himself nevertheless seems a bit careless with

his wordings, as he characterizes genital surgery for trans men as "an artificial penis" (Heede 2007, 21). Such pronouncements also run through Katherine Johnson's text, as she calls it a "penis-like construction". Both Heede and Johnson agree that trans male genital surgeries are so complicated and of such a poor quality that few opt for them. This, according to Johnson, "leaves the trans-man in the incongruous position of attempting to be a man with a vagina." (Johnson 2007, 66) Johnson is here implying that trans men are failed men by describing the phalloplasty-operated trans man as having not a penis, but a "penis-like construction" and the non-operated trans man as "attempting to be a man with a vagina". However, as the new book *Hung Jury: Testimonies of Genital Surgery by Transsexual Men* shows, statements like Heede and Johnsons are false and misleading (but unfortunately common), perpetuating "the myth that FTM genital surgery is unsuccessful and produces aesthetically poor, nonfunctioning penises" (Cotten 2012, 3). The information on both phalloplasty and metoidioplasty has been either sparse or painting a misleading and negative picture whether that is in mainstream media or scholarly work. But maybe more importantly, statements like Heede and Johnsons "also imply that trans men's genitalia are inauthentic second-hand replicas of cis-gender men's penises which are implicitly taken as the standard of measurement" (Cotten 2012, 3). The time gap between Cotten's work (2012) and Johnson's (2007) might explain the lack of knowledge, but to perpetuate negative (if not directly wrong) notions are nevertheless problematic. Besides one might ask to what degree these penises are "artificial" as Heede notes, as body tissue is being used to create them. Furthermore, it seems absurd to rely on some form of queer perspective and then denote only some gender expressions to be "artificial" or "constructions," and not all.

### **Which Trans Subject Is Recognized as Subversive?**

I want to return now to Beatie's disavowal of the category of the monster, which leads Heede to conclude that *Labor of Love* insistently tries to "normalize and dedemonize the project of the small nuclear family" (Heede 2012, 23). I am not denying that Beatie expresses an investment

in being included in certain definitions of normality, especially around couplehood and having children. But I am wondering why this seems to be an a priori heteronormative act whereas taking on the image of the monster is de facto subversive. I would argue that the interesting question is not *whether* individual claims of identity are normative/subversive or not – but *how* and *why* it seems more urgent for (some) trans people to disavow the category of the monster, and to claim recognition within culturally established categories. A possible answer is that “monster” is always already the circulating trope of intelligibility that “sticks” to trans people,<sup>6</sup> and it might therefore come as no surprise that many trans people try to negotiate and invoke other categories as self-identificatory labels. One might say that Beatie in particular, as one of the first pregnant men to go public, has been offered nothing but the category of the “freak”/“monster” in newspaper headlines. When being so overtly determined from the outside as a monster, monster might not be a particularly wanted or “subversive” category to take on. This does not necessarily make trans people like Beatie essentialists, but points to a greater vulnerability concerning de-humanization and misrecognition.

But more importantly, how come questions of normativity and subversion are both *the* scope and *the* conclusion of Heede’s analysis? Not only does an exclusive focus on subversive/normative claims of identity repeat and reduce trans to a personal identity issue, but it also forecloses a discussion of the cisgender contexts that trans people like Beatie must negotiate and maneuver – and how that sets the scene for the claims he is able and unable to make. Beatie’s divorce in 2012 from his wife Nancy is a case in point that brings up the importance of legal rights and reproductive rights for trans people as the questions regarding what counts as a sex-change surgery (and where) became crucial in determining Beatie’s right to divorce, to get custody over the children, and if and how much alimony he should pay. It would have been interesting if Heede (instead of assuming that we already know what heteronormativity is or looks like) had developed and rethought the concept of heteronormativity in connection with cissexism.<sup>7</sup> This would have helped specify the bodily norms, and social and state institutionalized classification systems that

trans people to varying degrees and with various effects, fail to comply with, and thereby become apparatuses of othering. To analytically explore these questions would also encourage a reflection of the actual contexts in which the problematic of identity occurs. As transgender studies scholar Vivianne Namaste points out, there is often "little concern for the individuals who live, work, and identify themselves as drag queens, transsexuals, or transgenderists" (Namaste 2000, 9), thus they appear as "rhetorical figures" wherein "the voices, struggles, and joys of real transgendered people in the everyday social world are noticeably absent" (Namaste 2000, 16).

It seems as if Heede has difficulty interpreting the pregnancy as anything but part of a heteronormative project. Procreating within a household of two is often considered rather reactionary within queer streams of thought – and especially the child as a promise of the future has been subjected to queer critic (Edelman 2004). Although this could be at stake in Heede's reading as well, it seems most of all to be Beatie's identification as a "heterosexual man" that makes it difficult for Heede to attach any kind of subversive potential to Beatie's trans identity. As transgender studies scholar Susan Stryker has argued several times, "queer" does all too often become a code word for "gay" or "lesbian," privileging sexual orientation and sexual identity and overlooking other ways of differing from heteronormativity (Stryker 2004, 214; 2006a, 7). I cannot help speculate about what gender expression and what sexual orientation/identity Beatie should have claimed and engaged in, in order for Heede to recognize these as subversive. It seems fair to say that queer theory (and Heede in particular) tends to celebrate trans identity performances and practices that embrace ambivalence (or in Heede's version, "monstrosity"), or various forms of transgression/crossings and/or sexual relations recognizable as non-heterogendered. However, queer theory has been more silent, or even critical toward trans identity performances or practices that seem more gender-conforming, or that have become recognized as reidealizing heterosexual relations. In other words, various forms of trans identifications and practices seem to possess a norm-breaking potential, as well as occupying *the* site where norms become reproduced.

The linking of queer to "the sexual" and the privileging of (certain) sexual practices and identities within queer theory have been raised and critiqued from different sides. Somatechnics scholars Nikki Sullivan and Samantha Murray state:

It is this knotty association of queer with "the sexual," or more specifically, with sexual practices and identities conceived as counter-hegemonic that, in our opinion, limits some of the interventions practiced under the banner of queer. (Sullivan and Murray 2009, 4)

However, already in 1994, feminist and queer studies scholar Biddy Martin warned against "the fear of being ordinary" in queer theory:

Having accepted the claim that interiorities and core gender identities are effects of normalizing, disciplinary mechanisms, many queer theorists seem to think that gender identities are therefore only constraining, and can be overridden by the greater mobility of queer desires. (Martin 1994, 102)

Martin encourages us to stop defining queerness as mobile and fluid, and to think critically about what then gets construed as stagnant and ensnaring (Martin 1994, 101). In line with Martin, I find it important to warn against creating a queer theoretical hierarchy or "normativity," and to assume in advance what to look for as normative or subversive. I also want to pinpoint the danger of celebrating mobility not just because of its class biases, but also because of its connection to current neoliberal trends.

I consider Heede's analysis as an example of a stream of queer studies that concerns itself with exposing whether the performances and narratives of trans people are subversive/radical enough. Trans identities seem to inhabit an ambivalent position and be a vulnerable point within a lot of queer theoretical research, construed as both radically fluid and stagnant. This has also been a concern raised by Rubin, who argues that trans people have been criticized as "gender traitors," and celebrated as

"gender revolutionaries" (Rubin 2003, 163). Rubin has in various writings been critical toward what he calls trans people's expectance to carry "the revolutionary burden of overthrowing gender or imagining what to replace it with" (Rubin 1998, 273). His critique is directed toward feminist and queer studies he accuses of "passing moral judgments on transsexual subjects, who should somehow know better than to 'believe' in gender (while letting nontranssexuals off the hook)" (Rubin 1998, 271). As far as I perceive it, two things are in play here: (1) an expectation that trans people enact (or should enact) a more "queer" version of gender and sexuality (whatever that means), and (2) an expectation that good research is critical and deconstructive. As queer and affect studies scholar Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick points out, many researchers rely on the power of unveiling, thus "unveiling [has] become the common currency of cultural and historicist studies" (Sedgwick 2003, 143). She calls this a "tracing-and-exposure project" that is "widely understood as a mandatory injunction rather than a possibility among other possibilities" (Sedgwick 2003, 124–5). In Heede's case this leads to an exclusive focus on revealing and/or subverting heteronormativity through analysis by pinpointing normative assumptions and/or drawing attention to "tricksters." However, this often result in an approach to the personal trans stories as "a suspect text," which "uncannily mirrors that of the policing clinician who has gone before [her/him]: the critic catches us out in our duplicity" (Prosser 1998, 131). The researcher is implicitly casted as the knowledgeable subject who outsmarts the subjects being researched, misled and caught up as they are in their false consciousness. To reflect upon and to discuss the problematics of power relations between the researcher and the research subject is prevalent and ongoing within the social and behavioral sciences but are often absent within certain parts of the humanities, not least literary and art historical analysis.

Last, but not least; although I find it analytically unfruitful and potentially harmful to let the pursuit of normativity/subversion be the main scope and conclusion of the analysis, I do find that Beatie's narrative is much more ambivalent than Heede allows it to be. What could indeed be more "queer" than to hold on to categories like heterosexual

man and yet give birth to his own child? Is this not challenging how we understand the relation between bodily functions, gender identity and sexual orientation?

### **Trans Life-Stories on the Narratological Dissecting Table**

Jodi Kaufmann is an US American queer/poststructuralist qualitative research methodologist. Her article "Trans-representation" is a re-reading of the trans woman Jessie's narrative, generated in 2004 in a biographical interview (Kaufmann 2010, 105). Kaufmann precedes the article with telling the story about how she made Jessie cry after she read Kaufmann's completed analysis of her narrative construction of gender. Jessie is quoted as saying: "You have taken away the identity I have worked all my life to build . . . Who am I if you take this away?" (Kaufmann 2010, 104) This episode becomes a starting point for a critical self-reflection as Kaufmann realizes that the queer plot reduced Jessie the person to a chain of signifying links, even though the intent was to bring "light to how we (re)produce gender and the body within the heteronormative" (Kaufmann 2010, 112). As Kaufmann further states: "I realized the queer theoretical constructs on which I relied to represent Jessie might have functioned to deconstruct gender but did so at the cost of Jessie's embodied experience." (Kaufmann 2010, 104) Kaufmann re-writes the article in an attempt to rethink how to avoid Jessie's "analytic erasure" (Kaufmann 2010, 104).

This rereading raises important and interesting methodological questions regarding the researcher's representation of interviewees through different kinds of theoretical perspectives. It also raises the question: Is it necessary for the researcher to encourage feedback and dialogue about the analysis – and how important is it that the researcher produces readings that the participants feel comfortable with and see themselves reflected in? Within feminist and activist knowledge production, as well as within the tradition of transgender studies, research is not separated from but grows out of everyday practices and politics, and involves dialogue with the people involved. Studying trans people is a particularly contested field, taking into consideration the



long history of exploitive and harmful research done by non-trans people. Trans theorist and performance artist Sandy Stone and transgender studies and philosophy scholar Jacob Hale's "Suggested Rules for Non-Transsexuals Writing about Transsexuals, Transsexuality, Transsexualism, or Trans" is a reminder of this history, but also a admonition to all researchers, trans or not, to engage with this field of study with a discerning mind and compassionate heart. Some of the key things that they point out are:

Interrogate your own subject position [...]. [---] Don't erase our voices by ignoring what we say and write [...]. [---] Don't totalize us, don't represent us or our discourses as monolithic or univocal [...]. [---] Be aware that if you judge us with reference to your political agenda (or agendas) taken as the measure or standard, [...] that it's equally legitimate (or illegitimate, as the case may be) for us to use our political agenda(s) as measures by which to judge you and your work. (Hale and Stone 1997)

What these suggested rules point out is both the importance of a nuanced representation that allows trans people to have a voice of their own, and the importance of the researcher to situate oneself.

Kaufmann's rereading of Jessie's story is performed through different plots; the hermaphrodite plot, the misalignment plot, the queer plot (focusing on heterologic and homologic), and the material embodiment plot. These plots become tools for analytical framing, and yet they shove Jessie as a person and the socio-cultural problems that she faces into the background. Kaufmann starts out with the "sex-gender misalignment plot with a residue of a hermaphroditic plot" (Kaufmann 2010, 106), which appears to give voice to Jessie's authentic self, but this is exactly the danger according to Kaufmann, because the heteronorms that saturate Jessie's telling then become hidden (Kaufmann 2010, 112). The plot is also dismissed by Kaufmann as a medical narrative, the learned and rehearsed narrative that one should tell in order to receive medical help (Kaufmann 2010, 107). Then Kaufmann attends to the queer plot, which starts out with a long description of different arguments within

the field and examples of queer representations of transsexuals, which Kaufmann argues "disrupts heteronormativity" (Kaufmann 2010, 108). Disruption was clearly Kaufmann's analytical intention and strategy in her first reading of Jessie, and what made Jessie uncomfortable. However, Kaufmann reproduces an analysis supposedly similar to her initial one under the performative title "Scene 3." Here an excerpt from the interview appears, which she thoroughly dissects using the concepts of heterologic and homologic as scalpels. The stated goal of this reading is to illustrate "not only that sex and gender are socially constructed but also how they are constructed to (re)produce heteronormativity" (Kaufmann 2010, 109–10). Kaufmann continues her plot reading by introducing the critique supplied by transgender studies of the way that queer theory "ignores and erases the lived experiences and desires of many transsexuals" (Kaufmann 2010, 110). Reading Jessie's story through "the material embodiment plot" suggested by transgender studies entails in Kaufmann's version a heavy use of quotes and hardly any analytical reflections. Kaufmann hereby suggests that paying attention to the voice of trans people themselves, annuls analytical reflection and contextualization of what is being said, which is certainly not the case. Kaufmann uses the work of Bernice Hausman to conclude: "It may be that all too easily theories of embodiment rely on simplistic notions of essentialism" as sexed embodiment is "presented with the simplistic and highly problematic idea of true gender" (Kaufmann 2010, 112). As noted previously (in connection with Dag Heede), relying on Hausman might be problematic, considering that several trans researchers have dismissed Hausman's research as transphobic (see, e.g., Prosser 1998; Stryker 2006a; Heyes 2007).

It does not seem clear to me how these plots help save Jessie from "analytic erasure" as the stated purpose was, especially taking into consideration that these plots contribute to a further dissection of the life-story, and a further detachment from a living, breathing storyteller and the social and political issues present in Jessie's life. Kaufmann's reading is, as I will argue, still primarily focused on revealing and mapping what she labels "veiled ideologies and structures" (Kaufmann 2010,

114). The focus continues to be on detecting how Jessie's narrative is implicated in heteronormative scripts and finding a representation that contributes to a disruption of heteronormativity. Tracking and mapping heteronormativity was initially an attempt to expose a regime of knowledge and social practice that Kaufmann saw as oppressing Jessie, constraining her from the possibility of living gender (Kaufmann 2010, 114). The question is whether Kaufmann's rereading ends up constraining Jessie as well. Although being a rereading, engaging self-reflexively with her own first reading, Kaufmann ends up reproducing yet again a dissection of Jessie's narrative that analytically reduces Jessie's voice to theoretical plots. Kaufmann's reading (like *some* types of queer readings) can be criticized for not paying enough attention to trans as an actual embodied and lived subjectivity, subjected to specific juridical and social discrimination (Prosser 1998; Namaste 2000; Rubin 2003). As Henry Rubin argues, too strong a focus on discursive constructions can easily end up neglecting embodied experience, invalidating the categories through which the subject makes sense of their experiences (Rubin 1998, 265). Jay Prosser has emphasized embodiment as a topic that he finds to be specifically overlooked within queer theory's study on trans issues, using the term "desomatization" to describe this neglect (Prosser 1998, 66). Or one might, in the words of Raewyn Connell, argue that Kaufmann's strict focus on "a problematic of identity," neglects to address the social issues of transition so present in trans women's lives (work, poverty, state organizations of police, health, family services, and so on) (Connell 2012, 864–5).

### **Exit: Who Lets the Subaltern Speak – And How?**

As I have argued, Johnson, Heede and Kaufmann do not situate themselves in their study, which have different and yet related effects for the analysis produced. Their readings reproduce a "seeing everything from nowhere" (Haraway 1988, 581). To speak with Haraway, they parade as the all-seeing eye/I who acts as if their view is not situated and informed by the politics of location. In Kaufmann's case, it is a self-reflective yet unmarked, disembodied nowhere. The apparently high degree of criti-

cal reevaluation does not include a reflection about the power relation implicated in a (presumably) non-trans female researcher deconstructing the life-narrative and gendered self-perception of a trans woman. Likewise, Johnson only positions herself in the abstract "we" (an assumed non-trans position), and she does not reflect on the ethical and methodological implications of conducting research on trans people as a (presumably) non-trans person. Heede is not conducting interviews, which makes the ethical and methodological issues concerning researcher and informant/research subject slightly different. But the question is whether a text, written under the label of autobiography deserves another kind of reading than Karen Blixen's short stories or H. C. Andersen's fairytales (which Heede has previously written about)? Is it okay to conduct the same kind of playful literary analysis no matter the character and genre of the text? In any case, it is problematic to request that trans people take on the category of the monster/the monstrous without delimitating from what position such a request is posed – and whose cause that might serve.

According to Haraway unlocated knowledges are irresponsible in the sense that they are unable to be called into account (Haraway 1988, 583). To position oneself as a researcher is therefore to take responsibility for one's "enabling practices" (Haraway 1988, 587), that is to demarcate and share on what grounds knowledge is produced. Accountability and responsibility is important not least for when translating and communicating "the cacophonous visions and visionary voices that characterize the knowledge of the subjugated" (Haraway 1988, 590). Or the other way around; assuming to represent, and give voice to, subjugated knowledges can also be dangerous, which the postcolonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak pinpoints in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1998). Here she warns that theoretical thinking (in her case Western, post-colonial) that seeks to allow the subaltern to speak might unknowingly perform the same kind of dominance that it seeks to dismantle. As Spivak states, radical criticism "gives an illusion of undermining subjective sovereignty while often providing a cover for this subject of knowledge" (Spivak 1998, 24). She acknowledges the attempt to undo the "epistemic

violence” done upon (in her case Indian) subalterns, but doing it from the outside risks reproducing a dependency and power relation in which (Western) intellectuals “speak for” the subaltern condition, rather than allowing them to speak for themselves. Or as Haraway puts it: “But here there also lies a serious danger of romanticizing and/or appropriating the vision of the less powerful while claiming to see from their positions.” (Haraway 1988, 584)

The critique raised by transgender studies scholars like e.g. Rubin, Prosser, and Namaste pinpoints how the development of the theoretical concept of (gender) performance and performativity lacks a reflection of the actual contexts in which they occur and omits inclusion of trans people’s actual lives and political demands. This does not mean that the overall queer theoretical framework is necessarily in opposition to trans experiences or interests as such, but it needs to be developed further to address the specificity of trans as a field of study. Butler’s later work *Undoing Gender* (2004) seems to be responding to, and warning against, some of the radical avant-garde readings produced under the banner of queer theory – some of which Butler herself has been accused of. However, I see these readings more present in activist and theoretical applications of Butler’s thinking, e.g. in Katherine Johnson, Dag Heede and Jodi Kaufmanns readings, than in her works themselves. As Butler makes clear, queer theory is not by definition opposing all identity claims, including stable sex (re)assignment, and “more important than any presupposition about the plasticity of identity or indeed its retrograde status is queer theory’s claim to be opposed to the unwanted legislation of identity” (Butler 2004, 7). And Butler specifies in connection with trans identity claims: “[T]he transsexual desire to become a man or a woman is not to be dismissed as a simple desire to conform to established identity categories.” (Butler 2004, 8)

What I object to in Johnson, Heede and Kaufmanns analysis is that they have too truncated readings that foreclose ambiguities and equivocality. I therefore wish for more space in which each story and storyteller is allowed to breathe. This does not suspend or deny the reality or gravity of heteronormative oppression that queer theory is

often focused on, but it allows for less monolithic readings, where one does not know in advance what is to be recognized as normative and as subversive. The point of a queer theoretical analysis is, as Butler pointed out back in 1993, to keep queer "a discursive site whose uses are not fully constrained in advance", and to consider the exclusionary force of one's analysis: "Who is represented by *which* use of the term, and who is excluded?" (Butler 1993, 230, 227) Or, as Haraway state: "We are also bound to seek perspective from these points of view, which can never be known in advance, that is, knowledge potent for constructing worlds less organized by axes of domination." (Haraway 1988, 585) This is crucial if we as researchers are to keep the field of queer, trans and feminist studies alive as thought provoking perspectives that matter and claims social change.

**TOBIAS RAUN** is an Assistant Professor at Communication Studies, Roskilde University, Denmark and editor in chief of the social media section in the new academic journal *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*. His PhD thesis explores trans self-representation and community building on YouTube. He has published extensively within the area of visual culture and new media, transgender and queer studies. His most recent publication is "Video Blogging as a Vehicle of Transformation: Exploring the Intersection Between Trans Identity and Information Technology" in *International Journal of Cultural Studies* (2014).

## REFERENCES

- Ahmed, Sara. 2004. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- . 2006. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- . 2010. *The Promise of Happiness*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.
- . 1993. *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*. New York: Routledge.

- . 2004. *Undoing Gender*. New York: Routledge.
- Connell, Raewyn. 2012. "Transsexual Women and Feminist Thought: Toward New Understanding and New Politics". *Signs* 37.4:857–81.
- Cotten, Trystan, ed. 2012. *Hung Jury: Testimonies of Genital Surgery by Transsexual Men*. Oakland, CA: Transgress Press.
- Edelman, Lee. 2004. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Frank, Arthur W. 2010. *Letting Stories Breathe: A Socio-Narratology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hale, Jacob, and Sandy Stone. 1997. "Suggested Rules for Non-Transsexuals Writing about Transsexuals, Transsexuality, Transsexualism, or Trans". <http://sandystone.com/hale.rules.html> (accessed 2014-05-22).
- Haraway, Donna. 1988. "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective". *Feminist Studies* 14.3:575–99.
- Hausman, Bernice L. 1995. *Changing Sex: Transsexualism, Technology, and the Idea of Gender*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Heede, Dag. 2012. "Fra 'en rigtig pige' til 'en gravid mand' – Transpersoner og reproduktion: Den sidste grænse?". *Kultur og Klasse* 40.113:11–26.
- Heyes, Cressida J. 2007. *Self-Transformations: Foucault, Ethics, and Normalized Bodies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Jeffreys, Sheila. 2003. *Unpacking Queer Politics: A Lesbian Feminist Perspective*. Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity Press, in association with Blackwell Publishing.
- . 2005. *Beauty and Misogyny: Harmful Cultural Practices in the West*. New York: Routledge.
- Johnson, Katherine. 2007. "Changing Sex, Changing Self: Theorizing Transitions in Embodied Subjectivity". *Men and Masculinities* 10.1:54–70.
- Kaufmann, Jodi. 2010. "Trans-representation". *Qualitative Inquiry* 16.2:104–15.
- Martin, Biddy. 1994. "Extraordinary Homosexuals and the Fear of Being Ordinary". *Differences* 6.2–3:100–25.
- Namaste, Viviane. 2000. *Invisible Lives: The Erasure of Transsexual and Transgendered People*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Meyer, Sabine. 2011. "Divine Interventions: (Re)birth and Creation Narratives in *Fra mand til kvinde – Lili Elbes bekendelser*". *Kvinder, Køn & Forskning* 3–4:68–76.
- Prosser, Jay. 1998. *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Raun, Tobias. 2010. "Screen-Births: Exploring the Transformative Potential in Trans Video Blogs on YouTube". *GJSS: Graduate Journal of Social Science*, December.
- . 2011. "Mand nok?: Om kropsliggørelser og maskulinitetsfortællinger i transkønnedes video blogs på YouTube" [Man Enough? Embodiment and Narratives of Masculinity in Trans Video Blogs on YouTube]. *Kvinder, Køn & Forskning* 3–4:20–30.

- 2012a. "Out Online: Trans Self-Representation and Community Building on YouTube". Ph.D diss., Cultural Encounters, Roskilde University.
- 2012b. "DIY Therapy: Exploring Affective Self-Representations in Trans Video Blogs on YouTube". In *Digital Cultures and the Politics of Emotion: Feelings, Affect and Technological Change*, edited by Athina Karatzogianni and Adi Kuntsman, 165–180. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- 2014. "Video Blogging as a Vehicle of Transformation: Exploring the Intersection between Trans Identity and Technology". *International Journal of Cultural Studies*.
- Raymond, Janice G. 1979. *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Rubin, Henry. 1998. "Phenomenology as Method in Trans Studies". *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 4.2:263–82.
- 2003. *Self-Made Men: Identity and Embodiment Among Transsexual Men*. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. 2003. "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You". In *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, 123–52. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Serano, Julia. 2007. *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*. Emeryville, CA: Seal Press.
- Shapiro, Judith. 1991. "Transsexualism: Reflections on the Persistence of Gender and the Mutability of Sex". In *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity*, edited by Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub, 248–79. New York: Routledge.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 1998. "Can the Subaltern Speak?". In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, 24–8. Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Stryker, Susan. 2004. "Transgender Studies: Queer Theory's Evil Twin". *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 10.2:212–5.
- 2006a. "(De)Subjugated Knowledges: An Introduction to Transgender Studies". In *The Transgender Studies Reader*, edited by Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle, 1–18. New York: Routledge.
- 2006b. "My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage". In *The Transgender Studies Reader*, edited by Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle, 244–56. New York: Routledge.
- 2008. *Transgender History*. Berkeley, CA: Seal Press.
- Sullivan, Nikki, and Samantha Murray. (2009) "Introduction". In *Somatechnics: Queering the Technologisation of Bodies*, edited by Nikki Sullivan and Samantha Murray, 1–12. Farnham: Ashgate.



## NOTES

1. I refer to trans as an inclusive term encompassing claims of gender identity that involves a "movement across a socially imposed boundary away from an unchosen starting place" (Stryker 2008a, 1, emphasis in original). I prefer the short version, "trans," because it does not have the pathologizing associations that "transsexual" has and because it is more inclusive. However I also prefer trans to transgender because the term transgender profiles gender (and not sex) as the boundary that is crossed.
2. To let stories breathe is an attitude inspired by the title of Professor of Sociology Arthur Frank's book about socio-narratology. Frank labels his approach "dialogical," and opposes it to interpretive analysis based on "decoding," where the analyst is assigned the privilege to speak and "reveal truths not readily accessible to those who see only appearances" (Frank 2010, 93–4). I will return to and elaborate on this throughout the article.
3. My translation from the Danish titel "Fra 'en rigtig pige' til 'en gravid mand' – Transpersoner og reproduktion: Den sidste grænse?".
4. Thomas Beatie has been sensationalized in tabloid headlines in 2008 as "The Pregnant Man," when he decided to carry his own children which his wife at the time was unable to do.
5. Phalloplasty is the construction of a (recognizable) penis by removing tissue from a donor site (another place on the body, typically on the arm or the thigh) and extending the urethra. Phalloplasty is not the only surgical solution, there is also metoidioplasty, that frees the already hormonally extended "mini-penis" (also labeled clitoris/dickclit etc.) and makes it protrude more prominently from the groin area. Trystan Cotten has edited the first collection of testimonies of genital surgery for trans men (Cotten ed. 2012).
6. It is rather telling that Susan Stryker has written a famous essay about the monster discussing trans identity and Victor Frankenstein. Here she *reclaims* a kinship with the monster – a kinship that has always already been appointed to her as a trans person. As she states: "Like the monster, I am too often perceived as less than fully human due to the means of my embodiment." (Stryker 2006b, 245)
7. Cissexism is the naturalization and authorization of the sex that one was assigned at birth as one's real and proper gender. Likewise, the relation between sex and gender is assumed to be natural and unproblematic, making trans people's sense of gender less authentic and legitimate as well as attributing trans people's potential incoherence between sex and gender an individualized problem and/or disorder. This creates a huge disparity between trans and non-trans people, not least in relation to access to gender-related health care, which e.g. Julia Serano from a US point of view exemplifies as insurance companies' coverage of hormone-replacement therapy, genital and breast reconstruction, and procedures that enhance or enable fertility and sexuality for non-trans people, but not for trans people.

Furthermore non-trans people are neither being pathologised, nor require anyone else's permission or approval for accessing gender-related health care or for having legal documents that reflect the gender one identifies as (Serano 2007, 157). Thus, there are different standards of legitimacy to people's identified and lived genders based on whether one is non-trans or trans (Serano 2007, 168). Cissexism is also connected to cissexual assumption, which is analogous to heterosexual assumption: one is assumed to be non-trans and fall naturally into the category of man or woman, making it impossible to be open about one's trans status unless one continuously "comes out" (Serano 2007, 164–5). Cissexual privilege is the gender entitlement and legitimacy that non-trans people are given and assume in their gender identification, which at times can also be extended to trans people when addressed in one's chosen gender or being allowed into gender-segregated spaces that one feels one belongs in – restrooms, for example. But as Serano states: "However, because I am a transsexual, the cissexual privilege that I experience is not equal to that of a cissexual because it can be brought into question at any time. It is perhaps best described as *conditional cissexual privilege*, because it can be taken away from me (and often is) as soon as I mention, or someone discovers, that I am transsexual." (Serano 2007, 169)

## SAMMENFATNING

Denne artikel rejser en række epistemologiske og metodologiske spørgsmål vedrørende læsningen af trans som identitetskategori. Disse spørgsmål er stærkt underbelyste i en skandinavisk akademisk kontekst, om end der ellers i stigende grad produceres analyser af trans identitetsnarrativer. Artiklen sætter fokus på, hvordan trans indrammes og betydningstilskrives indenfor visse former for queer teoretisk informerede læsninger. Gennem næranalyser af tre nyere tekster af henholdsvis Katherine Johnson, Dag Heede og Jodi Kaufmann påpeges farerne ved en alt for dissekerende læsning, da denne har tendens til at reducere trans til et spørgsmål om normativ (re)produktion eller subversiv dekonstruktion. Sluttelig argumenteres der for at (gen)besøge og ihukomme spørgsmålet om lokaliseringens politik som forsker og i den analytiske praksis; hvem taler og tildeles stemme – og på hvilke præmisser?

**Keywords:** methodology, epistemology, transgender studies, trans life-story narratives