We are who we say we are

Finding identity and community beyond gender norms

By Stephanie Burt

New York City Pride March, 1990 by Mariette Pathy Allen© Mariette Pathy Allen/Getty Images

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What does a middle-aged transgender English professor do at home in America in 2020? She might listen to the Spook School, a Scottish trans punk quartet; to the Las Vegas-bred nonbinary pop auteur Shamir; or to the folk-punk outfit Against Me! (starting with "Transgender Dysphoria Blues", from 2018). She might read new poems by essa ranapiri, the trans Maori poet who is a rising star in New Zealand, or by Cat Fitzpatrick, the Brooklyn-based British-born poet who uses Byronic forms for transfeminine experience. Turning to Twitter or email, she might answer correspondents seeking advice on how to come out. Then, she might

renew prescriptions for oestrogen and for the testosterone antagonist spironolactone, before stopping for lunch.

I, of course, am she and I have done all these things today. Except for the lunch and the oestrogen, none would have seemed likely, or even possible, ten years ago. What happened? One answer might be that that the US at least, reached a "Transgender Tipping Point", as *Time* magazine put it in 2014. More people, some of them famous, came out as trans, which led to more social acceptance, which led to more people coming out: a series of self-amplifying loops. A more nuanced answer might find, in those loops, what the philosopher Ian Hacking has called the process of "making up people". As a social and medical label becomes better known, more people discover that the label fits their experience (or, sometimes, their patients' experiences). What had been confusing, hard-to-identify feelings or events begin to organize themselves, in the mind of one person after another, often despite social stigma, into an identity.

That process does not make the identity good or bad (or fake). It does mean that a label – given timing, momentum, public attention – can rewire social, medical, educational and political systems. "Feminist" is one such label, Hacking says. "Alcoholic" is another. Others still are the labels subsumed in the mnemonic LGBTQ+, which describe feelings many of us noticed long before we gave them names. But once we have those names, they prompt new feelings: what came with shame now also comes with pride (or vice versa). The available labels vary, however: not only from era to era (before and after Stonewall, say), but from nation to nation, ethnolinguistic group to group, within a household, within a life.

That variation gives the South African journalist Mark Gevisser the topic for his ambitious, beautifully narrated book, whose lesbian and bi and gay and queer and trans and nonbinary and *hijra* and *waria* and *bakla* and *kothi* subjects live along what Gevisser names the Pink Line. Lit up by the internet, this line now extends across the world, from South Africa's "urban black queer subculture" to the beleaguered Russian trans advocacy organization Dyeti-404. On one side of the line are places where relatively welcoming understandings of queer and trans lives, organized around terms like "gay" and "trans", dominate. On the other side are the many places where people who share those understandings live in danger. As the Pink Line, like a low-pressure front on a weather map, nears one place after another, what had been perhaps semi-acknowledged ways of living become more visible and more suspect. Russian LGBTQ+ emergence, as Gevisser explains, preceded a Kremlin law of 2013 against "gay propaganda"; the law gave thugs a "license to harm". Around the same time, the Egyptian accountant Maha, a habitué of Cairo's Girls' Café, fell in love with its owner Amira; the internet-savvy pair wrongly believed that the Arab Spring would make lesbians safer. The Russian computer consultant Pasha, a trans woman, found that her ex-wife Yulia would not

let her see their son; the legal system took Yulia's side. And the charismatic Malawian domestic worker Tiwonge "Aunty" Chimbalanga – assigned male at birth, living as a woman – feared for her life after her *chinkoswe* (roughly, an engagement party) put her in a media spotlight.

Some endangered people become international migrants, only to find (with Amira and Maha in Amsterdam) that they cannot fit in abroad, either: the casual racism of a white-majority country, the disorientation that comes with a big move, and the distance from family make life too hard. Other migrants, like Tiwonge in South Africa, welcome financial and practical assistance, from NGOs and from well-meaning people, but risk long-term dependence. Sympathetic attention from strangers, Gevisser finds, is no guarantee of a stable next act.

For still other LGBTQ+ people, the international symbolism of queer identity – conveyed most obviously in the rainbow flag – can feel like a refuge from nation-states. The Palestinian Fadi and the Israeli Jewish Nadav found in their queerness or gayness or trans-ness "some kind of cosmopolitan identity that transcended bloody lines in the sand". The Pink Line slices through countries, dividing, for example, Mexico City, where same-sex marriage is almost routine, from Guadalajara, where the lesbian mothers Zaira and Martha are obliged to go to court for recognition. Gevisser follows these figures for years and tries to get to know them all; few other journalists (Andrew Solomon is one exception) have shown the sympathy and stamina necessary for such a task.

What of lives on my side of the line? They seem easier; often they are. But they come with new problems, some merely inconvenient (ask me about the screeners in US airports); some life-threatening (especially for people of colour; look up Tony McDade and Layleen Polanco). And they depend – as any lives must – on axioms about what matters and what is worthwhile. It might take a writer outside the US to see, as Gevisser does, how thoroughly, in some parts of America, "a successful gender transition came to signal a particularly American form of redemption: a person who succeeds against all odds, by being true to themselves".

Just as the internet introduced Western terms for queer lives into Egypt and India, the web can spread new ways to live among plugged-in young people anywhere – but only if those terms fit a niche and fill a need. Gevisser visits the college town of Ann Arbor, Michigan, and finds "a new Pink Line" in debates over gender transition, accompanied by a "youth rebellion". The normally unflappable chronicler seems baffled when one teen adopts the description "pansexual but homoromantic", meaning they feel attraction to any gender but only fall in love with genders close to their own. I'm baffled by his bafflement: such terms make sense to me. They are also growing more common, as more trans teens (and

tweens) come out. Are some so-called trans-trenders, who declare themselves trans because so many others are doing it?

If so, what is wrong with that? Concern has focused on young people deemed too impressionable to know their own minds and motivations. But most people who come out as trans, at any age, don't change their minds: "transition regret" runs at 1–2 per cent, according to multiple UK- and Europe-based studies. Those who do detransition (return to life in their genders assigned at birth) often do so to avoid discrimination, and try again to transition later. Perhaps more important, what's wrong with trying out another label, another gender, if the one you have been given stops working? What's so bad about a world with more trans, or possibly-trans, people in it? Social transition (new pronouns, new clothes) need not mean immediate medical transition; medical transition need not mean surgery (for many of us, it's the hormones that matter). Medical steps around early teen transition are always non-surgical and reversible. Social stigma seems the only lasting harm. In her early twenties, Rose, whom Gevisser meets through his Ann Arbor contacts, tried being a trans man and taking testosterone, but chose to live instead as a butch lesbian: "I had to go through being a man to understand that I am a woman". For every young person who wishes they had not gone that route, there seem to be several like Rose, who are glad they ran the experiment. Meanwhile, as Gevisser points out, "the vast majority of transgender youth" still wait for adulthood, if then, to get what they need.

"Need", of course, is relative. Some people who can identify as transgender – or as kothi or as gay – were once suicide risks. Some were not: we could (in Jennifer Finney Boylan's phrase) have gone on living our "second-best life". Real acceptance for any group requires not a grudging understanding that some people just can't help how they are – that would be mere tolerance – but the idea that human flourishing benefits from choice, and the knowledge that no choice is context-free. In a wonderful study from 2018, *Trans Kids: Being gendered in the twenty-first century*, which Gevisser cites, the sociologist Tey Meadow finds that US teens and families are turning trans identities from a failure of gender, something to be medically corrected, into a way to experience gender (what, in *Trans America*, the historian Barry Reay calls, approvingly, "transgender as process"). Many of those young people, along with their elders, are badly served by an all-or-nothing, man-or-woman model of transgender identity: life makes a lot more sense to them in between.

They are not the first to think that way. Gevisser concludes his study in and around Devinapattinam and Pondicherry, India, where globalized understandings of gay, lesbian and transgender identities – promoted, with reason, by HIV-prevention organizations – chafe against older ways. "A *kothi* is someone who lives in the village and does women's work", assigned male at birth, feminine in demeanour,

not normally seeking medical transition. *Hijras*, better known in the West (and more often conflated with transgender women), form an "elaborate society" of their own, with "rigid and arcane hierarchies" and strong social pressure for genital surgery, without which a *hijra* will always be bottom-rung. Gevisser's informants navigate these ways of life, seeking economic stability, love and personal harmony. They, too, "are forging gender identities for themselves in ways unimaginable … for their parents", which does not guarantee that they will meet their own needs.

The global store of trans and queer and similar identities includes not only the wealth of terms and roles Gevisser finds, but also the histories leading up to them. Barry Reay's detailed, in some ways unsurprising, *Trans America* records lives and controversies, social changes and medical debates, "from a time before trans in the nineteenth century" to the supposedly tipped over United States of today. Reay's past encompasses "cross-dressing in the frontier West" (where people who grew up as girls could enter cowboy country as men); the "wrong-body narrative" and its discontents; and the century-old "distinction between the transsexual and the transvestite". The latter wants to dress up as, or pretend to be, a woman: the former requires "body modification". Twentieth-century transmasculine people lived with parallel, if less scrutinized, distinctions.

While experts debated the boundary between these (in practice, overlapping) categories, gender-non-conforming people lived hard-to-classify lives. The Oregon-based novelist and medical doctor Alan Hart became what we would now call a stealth trans man, marrying a woman, taking hormones, living and publishing under his chosen name, and never disclosing his early life. A very different example, "the fairy Jenny June", "operated in working class New York. … fellating hundreds of workers (Irish, Italian, Jewish) and soldiers and sailors". The intersex "black patient Emma T" puzzled doctors in 1929 when she "decided to keep both her penis and vagina". Mid-century cross-dressers – many already married to women – who read the magazine *Transvestia* and followed the lead of its publisher Virginia Prince (who also set up the Foundation for Personality Expression to educate people about cross- dressing) took pains to distinguish themselves from the people who wanted "real womanhood".

Throughout the twentieth century, in Reay's telling, medical providers, middle-class advocacy organizations, and vernacular writers kept trying to sort true transsexuals (who couldn't help it, deserved rights, and required medical care) from a congeries of other categories (butch lesbians, cross-dressers, attention-seekers and the mentally ill). It is hard to read Reay's account of medical practice without wanting to punch the doctors: the egregious O. Ivar Lovaas, for example, who in the 1960s and 70s sought "preventative treatment for … transsexualism or some forms of homosexuality" with methods that recall *A Clockwork Orange*; or

the plastic surgeons who wrote, in 1974, that transsexual women have "lost all chance to be male" with "no way to be really female". Much of the standard late-twentieth-century narrative around what it means to be trans (born in the wrong body, fixed in one gender, known since birth, not related to sexual kinks) emerged because generations of "transsexuals told their therapists exactly what they wanted to hear".

By the 1970s, studies of trans people revealed "a chasm between the presented certainty and the social-sexual flux of individual lives". That flux could also find its place on stage, with rockers such as Jayne County (or, more briefly, David Bowie), in radical queer theatre troupes such as the Cockettes in San Francisco, and later in black and Latinx ball/house scenes, made famous by Jennie Livingston's documentary *Paris Is Burning*. Then came the "transgender turn" of the 1990s, when, Reay says, clinicians and cisgender arbiters began to "recognize sexual indeterminacies and uncertainties and shifting identities". Some also started to back away from narrow, intercourse-centred definitions of sex, which changed how they thought about gender: of course "gay men without penises" can "have sex with other gay men", as one 1990s researcher discovered by asking them.

"Hundreds of different self-identity descriptions" in modern America run from transgender and drag king to fem queens, nu women or girls. These figures can recall some Indian, Filipinx and other subjects in Gevisser's journey who despite "the absence of trans labels … were still able to identify their sense of self". But then these were not the people who never got out of the closet, who found no community, and would not have been available for study. Some wait, even now, for the Pink Line to pass over them, and for useful labels to emerge. "I am a demi-romantic, poly-sexual, genderqueer individual", says one teen quoted in Reay's tome. (The same terms describe at least three of my adult friends.) What do we call the line that separates people who understand those terms from people who refuse to understand them?

And yet the toughest boundary these books address isn't that one. Nor is it a line between older and newer, or global and regional, or historical and biological, or gay-liberationist and other ways to name people who violate gender norms. It is, instead, a boundary between a past in which you have to persuade hostile figures and institutions that you are, ineluctably and permanently, who you say you are – pleading with courts for rights, with schools for appropriate bathrooms, with medical providers for pills that cost 30p apiece – and a future in which gender roles and identities are something you get to try on, or try out, almost as you might try living in Glasgow, or becoming a carpenter, or square dancing, asking whether it feels right for you.

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