Transgender: A Useful Category?

Or, How the Historical Study of "Transsexual" and "Transvestite" Can Help Us Rethink "Transgender" as a Category

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Abstract This article seeks to start a discussion that may help us understand why the category "transgender," created to include all trans* experiences, has excluded some. If "transgender" cannot fully include all trans* people, can it still be a useful category to adequately capture and analyze the lived experience of historical actors? It is in tracing back the genealogy of *transgender*, in the search for a name that could encompass the multiple and sometimes contradictory relationships between one's body and its social recognition, that we may attempt to discover why *transgender* has eclipsed terms such as *transsexual* and *transvestite*. The article first examines the parallels between recent debates in the historiographies of gender and transgender as terms that can express the complex social representation of bodies negotiated by language. Second, it studies how much a genealogy of transgender in the past reveals in fact a multiplicity of terms to express a realignment between body and a self that can be read by society. Ultimately, the author proposes the study of first-person narratives as the best way to comprehend the multiple terms used to express the diverse and sometimes contradictory identities an individual can embody.

Keywords history of gender, transsexual, transvestite, narratives, identities

I would like to start by addressing some of the fundamental questions posed by the editors of this special issue: "Where do we find the transvestite and the transsexual? How have these categories been rendered untimely, retrograde, or counterrevolutionary?" Categories such as transvestite and transsexual have been overshadowed by the increasing acceptance of *transgender* as an umbrella term that includes all trans* experiences.[1] Has *transgender* instead become a category that, created to embrace all, has excluded some? If, as the general editors of *TSQ* (n.d.) propose, "'transgender' comes into play as a category, a process, a social assemblage, an increasingly intelligible gender identity, an identifiable threat to gender normativity, and a rubric for understanding the variability and contingency of

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gender across time, space, and cultures," then we must also rethink *transgender* as a historical term open to variations and multiple crossroads with other identities that is not only "a category, a process, a social assemblage" but also offers "intelligible gender identity" to those who dare to trespass gender boundaries. Transgender identities are the result of shifting productions of knowledge throughout history, grounded in a language that operates as a form of bridge between genders and bodies by translating the visual and physical body into a legible and social entity.

In this article I seek to start a discussion that may help us understand why a category created to include all trans* experiences has faced difficulties in doing so. If "transgender" cannot fully include all trans* people, can it still be a useful category to adequately capture and analyze the lived experience of historical actors? I believe that in tracing back the genealogy of *transgender*, in the search for a name that could encompass the multiple and sometimes contradictory relationships between one's body and its social recognition, we may discover why *transgender* has eclipsed terms such as *transsexual* and *transvestite* and what to do about it.

Words are a microcosm of larger social debates in which they are born. In a similar way to Paul B. Preciado's (2020: 78) "amnesic feminism that suffers from a chronic lack of knowledge of its own genealogy," the word *transgender* also needs to reclaim its linguistic past and trace back the complexity of its genealogy. As Michel Foucault saw it, a genealogical analysis points at an intellectual system that is at the mercy of historical incidents and power relations. To Foucault, the genealogical method is "the undermining of all forms of historically grounded truth claims, all those that are based on a retrieval of lost origins and simple lines of development" (Sax 1989: 769). Thus the genealogy of *transgender* also aims to avoid a simple line of development to reveal the complexity of a term and its transformation to serve the needs of individuals in their different historical and geopolitical contexts. The genealogical search of *transgender* takes us to unearthing how the search for a term came about at the same time as the production of knowledge about the body. Such knowledge production reveals the ability of different forms of knowledge to coexist and the multiplicity of languages to describe them. To analyze this genealogical process of the making of *transgender*, I will first examine the parallels between the recent debates in the historiographies of *gender* and *transgender* as terms that can express the complex social representation of bodies negotiated by language. Second, I will study how much a genealogy of *transgender* in the past reveals in fact a multiplicity of terms to express a realignment between body and a self that can be read by society. I will propose the study of first-person narratives as the best way to comprehend the multiple terms used to express the diverse and sometimes contradictory identities an individual can embody.

An issue to consider is whether using terms such as *trans** and *transgender* in a context in which these categories did not exist is valid for historical analysis. The same question has been raised regarding the use of terms such as *homosexual* (Reay 2009), *lesbian* (Velasco 2011), or *pornography* (Vicente 2016) before the nineteenth century. One cannot use categories that may impose modern values onto historical subjects. For this reason, we need to pair them with the language people used at the time to describe their historically situated trans* experiences, meanings, and lives. Albeit the possible errors that using a term that people did not recognize as such involves, *trans** and *transgender* are terms of convenience that allow us to encompass the diversity of experiences of people in the past whose gender did not coincide with the gender assigned at birth. Moreover, avoiding the modern terms may also result in being part of the silencing that brought us to study this very same subject (Velasco 2011). Likewise, it is risky to generalize *transgender* and its meaning and application in different cultural contexts. The same can be said with *nationalism*, which in some contexts has excluded feminism while in others it has empowered feminists (Rodó-Zárate 2020). Equally, categories such as "transgender" become useful in embracing all trans* experiences, depending on how much they can intersect with different groups and the alliances they create.

(Trans) Gender

The title of this article refers to Joan Scott's groundbreaking text "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," originally published in 1986 in *The American Historical Review*, in which the author examines the possibilities and limitations of the category "gender" to refer to the body's social constructions.[2] To Scott, the meaning of gender goes beyond the social construction of bodies and instead addresses relations of power and the creation of knowledge that embrace symbolic relations of subordination and hierarchy. Thus, gender provides the basis for giving meaning to "the organization and perception of historical knowledge" (31). More than two decades later, in 2011, Judith Butler and Elizabeth Weed reexamined Scott's proposal, questioning how much "gender" as a category is in fact useful to the study of human relations. Butler and Weed restored the question mark in "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis?"—the same question mark that the editors of the *AHR* had removed from Scott's article in 1986, perhaps looking for a certainty in the usefulness of gender that the author had never intended.[3]

By bringing back the question mark in Scott's article, one can explore the instability of the category "gender" and the difficulties it offers in classifying human behavior. Butler and Weed (2011: 3) warn us, "It is not possible to know whether gender is a useful category of analysis unless we can first understand the purposes

for which it is deployed, the broader politics it supports and helps to produce, and the geopolitical repercussions of its circulation." The circulation of "gender," the way it arises within the dialectics of power in each time, may make "gender" a useful category, but it underplays the relations that brought it in the first place. In many cases, a gender identity presupposes the supremacy of gender over other identities. Instead, one needs to acknowledge that gender is part of the multiple embodied identities a person has and that are a response to the production of knowledge of the body: how a body is perceived and accepted by others. As Lucas Platero (2014: 83) has argued, the production of knowledge always responds to certain expectations and forms of recognizing and validating. It does not work in a void; knowledge production is the result of "how relations of power are negotiated."

The parallels between the categories "gender" and "transgender" cannot be missed. Like "gender," "transgender" is also a category that presupposes a social construction of one's body. Like "gender" as well, "transgender" ultimately runs the risk of giving primacy to the social in shaping the meaning of the body. Both "gender" and "transgender" are "linguistic tools which extract certain information, experiences, and feelings about ourselves and others" (Valentine 2007: 31).[4] These linguistic tools need to make the body intelligible to society. But, first, those "experiences and feelings about ourselves" must be dug out, extracted, unearthed from what is hidden inside us, out into the world for others to see and recognize. All this is taking us to the primordial place of the body in the creation of the self, as the threshold between the inside, and truthful self, and the outside, the social and cultural recognition of the self. Any word that seeks to categorize the human experience—and its social existence—needs to acknowledge this. Both "gender" and "transgender" do so. If "gender" wants to include "sex," "transgender" also seeks to include body-focused terms like *transsexual* or *transvestite*. However, despite their aims of inclusion, both terms have in many ways failed to embrace the bodily experience of the self.

By pointing at the need to bring back the body in "gender" and "transgender," I do not intend to suggest that the body is an entity separate from the social and being obscured by these categories. Instead, I support the argument of those who have posited that the body can be only experienced from the inside and projected onto the outside. It is what José Ortega y Gasset (1929: 123) defined as the *intracuerpo* (intrabody): "Our psychic life, our external world, are both based on this internal image of our body that we always carry with us and becomes the measure for all." Or it is a bodily experience difficult to explain but that may reveal the genuine truth of the self, something Katie Rain Hill (2014: 44) felt "in the core of myself: that my external body did not match with how I felt inside." Any category must be able to express this multidimensional aspect of the body that goes beyond the social to embrace the intimate, personal, and almost

spiritual aspect of the self. It is a difficult task, since a linguistic expression of this complete self may risk the prospect of failure. Yet the genealogy of *transgender* can provide the roots to this multidimensional component of the embodied self and the attempts throughout history to find the name to define it.

Transgender first appeared as *transgenderism* in John Oliven's 1965 *Sexual Hygiene and Pathology* (Williams 2014: 233). Used in the 1970s by those who sought to distinguish themselves from transsexuals, *transgender* became in the 1990s a category celebrated for reflecting the flexibility and fluidity of gender (Hill 2013). It soon became an alternative term to *transsexual*, in vogue from the 1960s until the 1980s. "Transsexual" emphasized the medical and pharmacological aspect of changing one's sex, while "transgender" was meant to embrace any gender realignment of an individual's body. "Transgender" also offered hope for creating bridges that would make "possible a broad alliance among different gender-variant people, including cross-dressers and transsexuals" (Papoulias 2006: 231). Although "transgender" never completely replaced "transsexual," the term "transsexual" was progressively judged as reflecting a flawed transgender identity. From this perspective, "transsexual" was a term too closely connected to the body and the medicalization of the trans* body. Such focus on "transgender" as connected to a specific gender identity, even if fluid, made it a term less welcoming to other terminologies such as not only *transsexual* but also *transvestite*. Transvestites in their temporary assumption of a different appearance suggested a transitional and mutating practice rather than a solid identity, and this excluded them in practice from the transgender umbrella.

Scott saw the rise of the category "gender" as a phenomenon taking shape in the American academy. The category of "transgender" as well bears an Anglo-Saxon component. Yet, while American scholars generally shy away from using *transsexual* and *transvestite*, Vek Lewis and Manuel Roberto Escobar have shown how such categories have symbolic currency in many countries in Latin America. Rather than hiding trans* identities, by reclaiming the word *travestis* and *transsexual*, the person is in fact turning the queer body into a site of protest and subversive potential (Lewis 2010: 38). The body as "a site through which subjectivity is constructed and difference is articulated" keeps reclaiming its place in this story (Lewis 2013: 466). The trans* body is the result of a specific and historically based crossing of "regimes of knowledge-power" (Escobar 2016: 105). It is "a baroque construction," displaying multiple sides, socially translated by a diversity of languages. Defining oneself with words such as *marica* (fag), *puta* (whore), and *gai* (gay) and still thinking themselves as trans*, Escobar's subjects express a definition of the self that tries to maneuver through these "regimes of knowledge-power" to establish their own space of resistance.

Lewis's and Escobar's studies show the ways in which the body's space of resistance is constructed through the politics of recognition and the visibility of a

body, which allows us to connect the variations of the meaning of *transgender* to visual marks of identity. If "all of our identifying traits are forms of appearance, and the first content of our nature (and its first place of realization) is our appearance," then the key is to know how much one can find the language to identify those traits and translate them into marks of identity (Coccia 2016: 80). This identity may translate deeper characteristics of the human self, which is what, as we saw before, appears at the root of the trans* self. Zoologist Adolf Portmann (1967: 17) saw no difference between humans and other animals: all display a zest for trying to connect "what is visible and tangible to what is more and more deeply hidden." The outside is an expression of the inward individuality of each animal. It is what makes an animal sociable and therefore able to survive. From the zoologist's perspective, animal life and behavior teach that in the practice of living the outside and the inside become blurred, as there is a constant "desire" to be recognized by others. In the human world as well, there is this desire to be recognized, to blur the lines that separate the outside from the inside. Appearance is meant to guarantee survival and mating, but only humans can bridge the gap between the outside and the inside through cognitive language. Words translate the individual's different lived experiences into multiple identities. Identities become the individual's perception of the self as well as how it appears to others, the legibility of the representation.

A Genealogy of *Transgender*: In Search of Identities

In the twentieth and twenty-first century the terms *gender* and *transgender* have been closely intertwined with issues of identity. Gender has become such a fundamental part of people's self-definition as human beings that it is difficult not to think of it as one of the main marks of identity. However, the reality of a sovereign and all-reigning gender identity is difficult to sustain when looking at the many other identifications that are connected to gender, mainly, sexual identity. Moreover, in the current discussion on gender in Europe and America there has been a need to break down the term *gender* itself, with a multiplicity of subterms: *genderqueer*, *nonbinary*, *gender nonconforming*, *bigender*, *demigender*, *pangender*, and *agender*, just to name a few. The world of possibilities is wide open to what Rogers Brubaker (2016) has referred to as the "unsettled identities" that have characterized contemporary societies. To Brubaker, in the past few decades the "landscape of identities has become much more complex, fluid, and fragmented. As new categories have proliferated and old categories have come to seem ill fitting, we increasingly face uncertainties and ambiguities in identifying ourselves and categorizing others" (41). However, such unsettled identities have been constantly present in the past, at least of the last five hundred years.

But what is identity? Is it, as Susan Faludi (2016: 49) has asked, "what you choose, or what you can't escape?" Faludi's memoir about her transgender father

explores the maze that her father's transition to womanhood represented. Identity, or the sense of belonging to a group and what identifies it, is inexorably connected to the politics of recognition, and national and religious recognition adds layers to gender identity. To me it appears as a seesaw because, as much as one wants it to remain steady, it never does. The pivot point of the seesaw represented by the body is never wide enough to allow for trans* individuals and society to maintain a stable identity. From Faludi's perspective her father sees her acceptance and recognition as a woman as part of the identity recovery of her nation, Hungary, and her conflictive Jewishness. In Faludi's case the politics of recognition were at play. One may feel belonging to a group, but it becomes a social reality only when the group recognizes us as one of them. In fact, the bases for existence and "the desire to persist in one's own being is fulfilled only through the desire to be recognized," or to match the outside with the inside (Butler 2005: 43). This desire seems to drive the need to proclaim one's identity to the world. Faludi's question, however, remains unanswered: Does one choose one's identity or is it something ingrained in ourselves, something we cannot escape? Does one's identity need to match society's expectations of the limited number of identities available to each individual? When we examine the narratives that trans* individuals produced throughout history, we can say at the very least that transgender is one of multiple identities that can define an individual. Moreover, "transgender" itself is the result of multiple identities that in twentieth-century Western societies may well include "transvestite" and "transsexual." Choosing one over the other would be as anachronistic as the term *identity* itself.

In the recent study of three gender stories from nineteenth-century France, Rachel Mesch (2020) points at the difficulties of talking about identity in history. Quoting Lisa Duggan's (1993: 793) definition of identity as the "story or narrative structure that gives meaning to experience," Mesch (2020: 11) refers to gender identity as "stories" rather than labels, a "necessary and vital tale to tell" for trans* people. This is also Jen Manion's (2020) proposal in Manion's analysis of "female husbands," people assigned female at birth who lived as men and married other women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in England and the United States. To Manion, it is in the first-person account, in the intimate projection of the self to seek social recognition, that one can grasp at the multiple marks of identities of an individual and which are favored and why. The body of trans* stories may in fact create a "transgender time" that "challenges traditional chronology and highlights the temporal dislocations necessary for self-narrative" (Devun and Tortorici 2018: 521). It is in this storytelling where the visual recognition of someone, and the language to express this recognition, come together to bridge the gap between the body and the social. The external appearance and behavior of someone can establish the forms of knowledge that help identify that person. As the title of the 2014 edited collection *Otras formas de (re)conocer* (*Other*

Ways of (Re)cognizing) (Mendia Azkue et al. 2014) references, the act of (re)cognizing allows one to recall something already (visually) experienced. In the process of recalling that image, allowing the memory of something that has always been there to resurface, the brain generates new knowledge. This process lies at the core of the politics of recognition in an ongoing process of first recognizing and then offering entitlement to what is recognized. From this perspective it is the first-person account that may reveal "the dialectics of power" Butler and Weed referred to. Autobiographical narratives had the potential of revealing the trespassing of identities—gender, race, religion, and nationality—and the power relations behind the construction of the self.

Many writers have pointed out how much identities are the result of stories we construct and tell to ourselves and others, from Jay Prosser's (1998) concept of "narrative work" to Joan Didion's "we tell ourselves stories in order to live," Adriana Cavarero's (2000) "narratives of the self," or Julia Kristeva's (2001) "life is a story." Certain narratives have a prearranged script, and it is difficult to (re)cognize them without that symbolic guidance. As if it we were trying to put into words a dream that we had just woken up from, the narrative line offers us the possibility of making sense of a life made up of "disparate images" (Didion 1979: 1). This narrative line can be as eclectic and dissonant as one may wish, and only the individual has the potential to destabilize gender with their first-person narratives, sometimes mixing narratives and voices. In their autobiography *Heaven*, Emerson Whitney (2020) brings several voices in the asymmetrical construction of the self, but it is Maggie Nelson's (2015) *The Argonauts*, promoted as "a genre-bending memoir, a work of 'auto theory' offering fresh, fierce, and timely thinking about desire, identity, and the limitations and possibilities of love and language," that offers multiple and conflictive layers of relations. Nelson's view of trans* experiences and the language to describe them may better express the core of trans* narratives throughout history—the use of terms that change in relation to power relations and creation of knowledge. The naming of the self occurs in accumulative form, and earlier concepts are never forgotten but in fact are kept as alternatives (Daston and Galison 2007). Equally new words to describe trans* ways of living are produced across time, not to replace old ones but to coexist with them. At the same time, the search for genealogy and historical precedents relates to the attempt to "stabilize" the conflict between the individual and society. While the individual tends to express in their personal narratives a multitude of identities and tries to find the language that defines them, the receptor of these narratives will tend to choose a single denominator that reduces all those identities into a single category.

A historical analysis of narratives of the self offers a window into the multiple constructions of identities and how they can produce knowledge toward the politics of recognition. In my work I found that the confessional genre is,

among the first-person narratives, the one that offers the best possible window into this difficult-to-grasp relation between the inside and the outside of trans* experiences. Because of the direct association between confession and truth production when confessing, individuals reveal their "most secret nature" through the penitent's examination of the sins of the body or through the corporal violence or coercion authorities applied to the accused (Foucault 1980: 60). Departing from Saint Augustine of Hippo's *Confessions* (2008), confessants not only reveal a truth they had been hiding inside themselves, but the process happens only through a painful revelation that involves a transformation, the root of conversion to the new self that was the original and truthful self. This spiritual component inherited in the confession allows the trans* confessant to access the intrabody that Ortega y Gasset was referring to. Confession can extract this deep and hard-to-explain knowledge of the self that only the person themselves knows but only through confession can be made public. This was the Inquisition's intent in making Elena/Eleno de Céspedes, the Spanish "mulatto" surgeon accused of sodomy, confess before its tribunal. Céspedes appeared before the inquisitors on July 17, 1587, ready to provide a "genealogy" to the tribunal. Confession before the tribunal of the Inquisition, expected from each convict, was part of a set of power relations—the dialogue between the accused and the accuser, what the confession produced and what the tribunal expected to hear—that produced knowledge about the body and the self. In their confession, the accused was requested to present the truth about oneself by relating their life story through a genealogy account.

Genealogies revealed fundamental information for the inquisitors: the history of the individual as a good Christian, how and when they derailed from the right path as well as the networks created in their journeys toward possible heresy. In their genealogy, Céspedes extracted multiple identities from their selves as a branded former slave, a soldier, a dissident, and a medical practitioner, all shaped by their condition as a possible "hermaphrodite" in a brown body.[5] While Céspedes's actions reveal a multiplicity of identities, they were all merging into one that the Inquisition could recognize as "truthful." Céspedes presented themselves as a good Christian in the body of a hermaphrodite: "Even though I was a woman I was also a man. Since I had the nature of a man. I was suitable to marry" (Kagan and Dyer 2004: 51). Céspedes's narrative is that of a good Christian, marrying a woman thinking themselves to be a man. Céspedes's garments, jobs, literacy, and attraction to women entitled Céspedes to be a man and to highlight the physical part of themselves that was hidden.[6] The contrast lies in Céspedes's personal account to the Inquisition that combines multiple identities and a fluctuant body with a language that wants to find a way to convey a stable self for the inquisitors to read and recognize as a "livable self" (Butler 2016: 18). At the end of the document of Céspedes's declaration, Elen* has an ink stain where the *a* (the female, Elena)

or *o* (the masculine, Eleno) should have been.[7] We do not know whether the drop of ink was accidental. But perhaps, despite themselves, the inquisitors were also projecting Céspedes's ambiguity by combining the two names *Elena*/*Eleno* to describe the accused.

Confessions express the ambiguities and fluctuant definitions of the self that are a common pattern in the genealogy of *transgender*. They are immersed in relations of power, on "the structures that let us live," finding points in common, establishing a compromise (Butler 2016: 19). This contrasts the multiple identities of the confessant with the need to have one single identity that the confessor needs to hear, making the confessant's main identity readable to the receiver. Relations of power also frame the case of the Spanish lieutenant Erauso's confession to the bishop of Guamanga (Perú) in 1623.[8] Born in 1592 in Donostia-San Sebastián (Spain), and placed at a young age by their parents in a convent, Erauso (1992: 64) later told the bishop that before professing the final vows, "I left the convent for such and such reason, went to such and such place, undressed myself and dressed myself again, cut my hair, traveled here and there." In their confession, Erauso saw no contradiction in presenting themselves as a virgin, baptized as Catalina, who nevertheless was entitled to live and dress as a man and wear the name *Antonio* because of their valiant service to the monarch. Erauso portrayed a body that had the potential to be ambiguous. As contemporary accounts reported, Erauso "looks more like a castrato (*capón*) than a woman," a comment that synthesizes Erauso's efforts to portray themselves as more than a man (as a soldier beyond the constraints of sex) and as a hero ("more a valiant soldier than a courtier") (128). Erauso's ambiguity is also reflected in the use of pronouns in their story, referring to themselves in feminine while framing a gender that was clearly masculine in the expected male preference for women, and the violence and aggressivity portrayed throughout the story. Erauso thus ends their narrative with the cutting answer to a cheeky lady who greeted Erauso with the feminine "Señora Catalina," to which the newly named Antonio de Erauso responded, "Señora *puta* (whore), [I have come] to give you a hundred strokes and a hundred gashes to the one who would dare to defend you" (124). The theatrical ending to what is already a problematic text (Erauso's original manuscript was lost and survives only as a late eighteenth-century transcript) reveals, however, a reaffirmation of a masculine gender identity that wants to shine through any possible female component of Erauso. The male gender ending, however, cannot erase the entire text in which Erauso establishes their authority through a female virginity, heroic deeds, and their status as a noble Basc.

Throughout nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe and America, categories that identify trans* experience reveal the ambiguities and fluctuant definitions of the self. Céspedes and Erauso, for example, saw themselves immersed

in the relations of power that create specific knowledge about the body. If Céspedes presented themselves as a hermaphrodite and Erauso as a military hero, they both did it after sorting out multiple identities of themselves: Céspedes as a soldier and surgeon, Erauso as a noble Basc and former novice. Equally, three centuries later Ralph Werther/Jennie June, the Connecticut-born author of *Autobiography of an Androgyne* ([1919] 2008) constructed a soul-searching confessional narrative that offered a multidimensional view of the self. The author did not find any conclusive adjective that could identify them as a transvestite or homosexual, but instead searched for the right terminology to label the trans* experience: *fairie*, *invert*, *androgyne*, *hermaphroditos*. To June and others terms such as *homosexual*, *androgynous*, *intersex*, *transsexual*, and *transvestite* were exchangeable and fluctuant; someone could identify with one in a given moment and another in a different time of their lives or be several at once.

Despite the complexity of identities portrayed in the confessional account, both confessant and their audiences tended to narrow the scope of identities to one, perhaps searching for an umbrella term that helped encompass the complexity of human nature and identities. In fact, this was the aim of Alfred Herzog, the Austrian-born physician established in New York who agreed to publish Werther/June's manuscript. To Herzog *Autobiography of an Androgyne* was the product of a homosexual in search of redemption. The same single identity was behind the arrest in 1968 of M.E. in the Catalan town of Hospitalet. Because M.E. was arrested "in suspicious attitude and dressed as a man," their actions easily fell under the "homosexual" umbrella used by medical and policing authorities during the dictatorship in Spain, an umbrella that gathered "different sexualities and gender expressions" (Platero 2015: 16, 26). The labeling of M.E. as "transvestite" and "homosexual" probably contrasted and clashed with the multiple words available at the time for those accused of homosexuality. Much like the "transgender" umbrella, the "homosexual" umbrella of the 1960s failed to acknowledge the complicated and rich diversity of gender and sexual identities, revealed in recent interviews of Silvia Reyes Plata, a Spanish entertainer arrested in Barcelona in 1974 for "making ostentation of his homosexuality" (se hallaba haciendo ostentación de su homosexualidad) (Terrasa Mateu 2016: 463). In both the documentary *Bones of Contention* (dir. Andrea Weiss, 2017) about the memory of the repression of LGBTQ rights in Spain as well as in an interview by the doctoral candidate Jordi Terrasa Mateu in 2016, Reyes refers to herself as "homosexual," "gay," "transvestite," and "transsexual" alternatively. According to Terrasa Mateu (2016: 168), Reyes explained she felt "absolutely comfortable with the word gay" and that she "lacked prejudgments in choosing a word that defined her sexual orientation and gender." Reyes is probably not unique in embracing a multiple terminology that helps her define what to her is a way of living and feeling.

The sense of the self as multifaced, body- and soul-searching contrasts, then, with a desire from the other to find a single word that would embrace this complex denomination. When in 1966 the German American endocrinologist Harry Benjamin popularized the term *transsexual*, he did it by obscuring other terms such as *transvestite*, *androgynous*, or *homosexual* that *transsexual* was meant to encompass. Yet the body has always had the potential to be a site of resistance refusing to be circumscribed. Trans* experiences kept projecting this hesitance (and resistance) to being labeled. Louis Graydon Sullivan, a native of Milwaukee, and the first well-known gay trans* man in the United States, wrote in his diary in September 1979, "I don't know if I am a deluded transvestite or an overly cautious transsexual" (Reay 2019: 140, 148). At the end of his life, Sullivan settled for a gay male identity, but one cannot erase the journey that took him there, full of ambiguities that, as Sullivan himself saw, were "far more revolutionary & futuristic than trying to resolve it along some obscure conventional lines" (148). Fixed terminologies never fully satisfied Sullivan, but perhaps he ended up acknowledging that he also had to aim at securing a "livable life" to be able to survive as a trans* man.

Conclusion

"Transgender," initially meant to offer visibility and acceptance to the bearer, has now become a sort of cloak that renders invisible all the nuances and multiple identities of trans* people. To be able to grant visibility to all trans* experiences, the need to destabilize language seems key. If, as David Valentine already expressed in his 2007 *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category*, the category "transgender" was in the 1990s a useful construction mostly for activists and meant to include all "gender-variant individuals," then the category may have already worn out its own use as new power relations are being established in the evolving genealogy of *transgender*. As Valentine (n.d.) pointed out, "This vision carries with it assumptions about gender and sexuality that reinforce racial and class hierarchies." Many others within the queer community have echoed Valentine's concerns and questioned the fixed language that constrains the multiplicity of identities. Perhaps unwillingly and unintentionally, "transgender" has become linked to an identity that presupposes a legible body. Even if "transgender" wants to include all trans* possibilities, at the end of the day it grants visibility to those who display a stable identity, even if it entails an ambiguous gender. It is important to make identities concrete—real—or we risk the invisibility that mutable identities threaten to bring. In seeking to stabilize, we may leave out—render invisible, hide—what does not fit. This is at the core of the relations of power at work in the rise of "transgender" and its evolving place in our linguistic map. Perhaps it would be useful here to refer to J. L. Austin's (1962: 4–7) contrast between "constative" and "performative" utterances: the former is a speech that

states or reports, while the latter implies an action added to the description of what one is doing. The various terms that refer to the trans* experiences are meant to be "constative" or descriptive, while in the practice of their daily use they appear as "performative," constructing realities and with the potential of transforming the very same utterance they had originated from. The performative use of a term such as "transgender," initially intended as descriptive, ultimately creates tensions expressed in the debate over the use of "transgender" as a common denominator for the diversity of trans* experiences.[9]

The need for a creation of a stable identity that the genealogy of the word *transgender* reveals is a process, the historical journey to progressively demand a single identity from individuals. This gender purity has historically developed in tandem with racial purity, even before the abolition of slavery in the colonial world and the inclusion of former slaves into the community of free citizens of a nation (Martínez 2013). Multiple gender denominations as much as mixed races grew progressively unwelcomed and, worse yet, unreadable (Snorton 2017). The fear has always been to remain invisible. As Viviane Namaste (2000: 2) argued, "Transsexuals are continually and perpetually erased in the cultural and institutional world."[10] Wrongly read, the body that is asymmetric appears as monstrous, this being a recurrent fear in trans* narratives (Mercier 2019). Worse than risking invisibility throughout history, individuals who were not recognized as either male or female were at risk of becoming targets of violence (Butler 2005: 31). Transphobia emanates mostly from seeing the trans* body as a monstrosity that does not fulfill the human patterns and thus invites aggression and violence (Stryker 1994). Identifying oneself as either transsexual or transvestite may open this wound by presenting the trans* body as incomplete, a medical project or a mutable self, a body that defies normality and therefore acceptance.

Yet the potential subversive element of any transgender lies in its lack of stability. Can we then recover the categories "transsexual" and "transvestite" to continue making *transgender* a subversive word? But how? Perhaps by recognizing the instability of terms that language must express and that the term *category* itself denies. The reality would be a "blending of categories" that David Valentine foresees in "transgender, gay, transsexual, transvestite, and others" (Reay 2020: 207). Yet "category" itself may be a word that lacks the porosity of other concepts such as experience. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989: 139), in the now classic work "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex," emphasized the benefits of approaching the study of "categories" from the perspective of "experiences." Like category, identity is also a concept that may lack flexibility, and perhaps we should be, as Preciado (2019a: 37) suggests, "thinking in terms of relation and potential of transformation, instead of terms of identity." It is interesting to note that in the Spanish version of *An Apartment on Uranus* Preciado (2019a: 25) uses the word *nociones* (*notions*) to refer to "a system of visibility, of representation, and of

granting of sovereignty and political recognition."[11] Preciado seems to propose the need to stay away from categories, by connecting notions with a "system of visibility, representation." Categories, "a division within a system of classification," are an effort to create "legible individuals" so that the reading cannot be confusing. Yet the English translation of Preciado's work uses the word *categories* instead of *notions*, explained by the fact that the translator uses the French version of *An Apartment on Uranus*. Preciado wrote both the French and the Spanish versions, which came out simultaneously in spring of 2019. The two, *Un appartement sur Uranus: Chroniques de la traversée* (2019b) and *Un apartamento en Urano: Crónicas del cruce* (2019a), are almost identical texts but bear differences in the use of the language to address what Preciado calls his place as "un disidente del régimen binario sexo-género" (a dissident of the sex-gender binary regime) or "un dissident du système genre-genre" (a dissident of the gender-genre system) (Preciado 2019a, 2019b). The multiple versions of Preciado's work make us question: What are categories? Are categories differently constructed in distinct languages portraying different notions of the body evolving from specific power relations? Is *transgender* or anything that has as its root *gender* a useful notion to get at the origin of the notions of human divisions? I need to leave the reader with these open questions so we can all continue discussing the difficulties of inclusion in an age of division and dissent.

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Notes

1. I use the term *trans** to refer to the wide spectrum of transgender identities and experiences. Although I risk the possibility of falling into the same limitations that *transgender* has, by removing *gender* from *trans*, it may result in a term that reaches further out from the constraints of *gender* and, as Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah, and Lisa Jean Moore (2008: 11) suggested, make it more open ended and relational.
2. Scott's article was revisited in 2008 in an *AHR Forum* (Scott 2008).
3. In a reissue of the article, Scott expressed her desire to maintain the question mark.
4. Valentine's quote refers to *gender* and *sexuality*, but it can also apply to *transgender*.
5. Several scholars have studied the case of Céspedes: Israel Burshatin, Richard Kagan and Abigail Dyed, Emilio Maganto Pavón, Francois Soyer, Sherry Velasco, and Lisa Vollendorf, just to name a few.

6. Céspedes seemed to lack facial hair and had pierced ears, traditional among Castilian women, but this was also the practice of men in some African countries.
7. The scribe also changed pronouns, depending on the context in which Céspedes was described (when listing Céspedes's jobs, the scribe noted Céspedes with the masculine pronouns).
8. Erauso confessed before the bishop after having sought ecclesiastical protection to avoid arrest for murder. Secondary literature on "the Lieutenant Nun" is extensive. Among the long list of authors who have analyzed the manuscript of Erauso's confession are Nerea Aresti, Christopher Kark, Carolyn McCarthy, Eva Mendieta, Pedro Rubio Merino, Cathy Rex, Michele and Gabriel Stepto, Rima de Vallbona, and Sherry Velasco.
9. I would like to thank the anonymous reader of this article who suggested this idea.
10. Namaste uses both the term *transsexual* and *transgender*.
11. Both quotes are my own translation from the Spanish.

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