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OTHERS OF MY KIND: Transatlantic Transgender Histories
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Trans Transatlantic

Nora Eckert

Translated by Michael Thomas Taylor and Annette F. Timm

The day of my interview was one of the very hot days of the summer of 2019, and it was a Sunday. The interview took place in a recording studio. Was it in Tempelhof or was this already Neukölln? It isn't actually important where exactly the border between these two Berlin districts runs; it was far more important to me that the bus dropped me off right in front of the entrance to the studio grounds. And yet the realization that the interview took place somewhere in this in-between space still seems to me, in retrospect, delightful. After all, we trans* people are born border crossers, and we are at home in the in-between.¹ We know only too well what border crossings feel like within ourselves and in society, in everyday life and wherever our trans and nonbinary bodies make us conspicuous.

And so today the interview for a video that would accompany an exhibition at the Gay Museum in Berlin. Some people unknown to me had discovered a piece of previously unknown trans* history – doubtless something like that famous suitcase in the attic, bulging with a true treasure trove of knowledge. There was talk about a collection of letters documenting an early transatlantic network of trans women. It is actually strange that we today celebrate something like this as a discovery. We do this, I would argue, because we trans*

*We said to the world:
hey you all, your
model is too limited;
there are more than
two genders and
there's nothing new
about that.*

people essentially have no history, and we therefore worship every discovery as proof of our existence. This also distinguishes us from other humans – who, after all, have their own history of humanity in which one finds many men and fewer women, but rarely us. In the meantime we certainly have one or two historical studies on the subject of trans* histories, but they are all primarily about how we have been viewed by science and society – we the mysterious beings who despite countless sexological, psychological, and medical theories about us remain mysterious beings. Where do we come from and where do we get the knowledge about being what we are? Most people probably think that we come straight out of a freakshow. But I mean something else: I see myself and my kind as one possibility in nature. We simply belong to it, and we fit exactly between man and woman; we are men in female bodies and women in male bodies – bodies that we change individually. This is the way I see it, and this is the way I live it.

My favourite biologist explained it to us with only three words: nature loves variety. For me, this is the key: like all humans we are part of natural history. For me this means that we have existed at all times and everywhere. Questions of livability and the resulting visibility are an entirely different matter. And this is where culture draws a line through the accounting, at least our binary, heteronormative culture, because Milton Diamond's sentence has a second half, and it goes like this: unfortunately society hates it. And there's the rub. Our trans* history could be told as a history of humankind since it was always and remains

a part of this history, but so rarely has it been written down. This would also be a history with long stretches of absence, and for the most part it would be a sad history, because often enough we paid for our nature with our lives, violently snatched away from too many of us in the past and still today; transphobia and transmisogyny remain our dogged shadows.

But back to that hot Sunday. The studio was easy to find on the expansive grounds, because Sabrina – one of the two directors of the film, who had invited me for the interview – had provided perfect directions. The difference between indoors and outdoors could not have been more extreme. Barely having stepped out from under the glaring and brooding sun I was now standing in this dark and cool room, completely cut off from the outside world. Like a black hole, the studio seemed to have swallowed everything that was of the outside world – there was no ray of light, no sound penetrated the walls. Inside I saw just one small illuminated island. Only as I came closer did I recognize a furnished corner room, set up with great attention to detail as a piece of scenery. Sabrina's friendly welcome was that of a familial hostess. She asked me to take my place on the sofa. And then there was also a cameraman, and suddenly I felt incredibly important, as if I were sitting in the middle of a film set and it was really all about me, about my life story. After all, I was intimately acquainted with this '50s ambiance; it brought back memories. This was my childhood. I remembered living rooms that looked like this or something like this. Sabrina explained that this was

Carla's room and that Carla was one of the main characters in a recently discovered trans* history. The exhibition would show many photos of Carla's friends taken in a living room like the one reconstructed here. So I started telling how it was for us trans* women in the '70s, and I got to meet some trans* women who had still been living in the intolerant and stuffy '60s. That's why for me it wasn't mainly this film set or even the particular history told in the exhibition, which was the occasion for our encounter, that made me realize how much I myself have become a piece of trans* history. I have been living as a trans* woman for forty-three years, and for Carla I would have been something like the next generation. She could have been my aunt. The scene from the 1950s was like a connecting flight into my own past, taking me to the history that was a prelude to my trans* biography.

During our conversation on the sofa in Carla's room, the term "pioneer" came up. We wouldn't have called ourselves that, but in the end that's what we were, because through the lives we lived as trans* we conquered a convivial and social space in which we had not previously existed. We literally took possession of reality, from where we could no longer be driven away. We did not yet have a voice in the sociopolitical realm, but we had stopped being invisible. We did pioneering work, approaching the binary world with growing self-awareness and self-confidence. We said to the world: hey you all, your model is too limited; there are more than two genders and there's nothing new about that. We gradually gained a presence in the media, which often merely served as a vehicle for

cis voyeurism. Nevertheless, the discussion shifted and it was no longer possible to deny our legal existence. What was more important for us was that we, too, like Carla and her friends, built and maintained private networks. There was still a very long way to go to before trans* folk came together to found their own organizations. In a big city like Berlin, where I've lived since 1973, a lot of things were easier than in the countryside, where you were left to think you were the only trans* person in the world. As I look at this previously unknown transatlantic bridge, built by trans* women, I also see unexpected continuity in our still unwritten history. For me, the crucial factor in such a history is that it needs to be told from our very specific life perspective: how did we experience and understand it, how did we live and experience being trans*? What do our forms of self-discovery look like? What hindered them, what encouraged them? Claiming the power to interpret ourselves – this will be our project for the future.

The simple and tidy world in which Carla lived suggests normality, which is something we obviously often long for as border crossers and gender troublemakers. What always mattered then and still matters now is the ability to live our lives, social acceptance, the feeling of belonging. And however natural it might seem, we cannot misunderstand this to mean conforming or fitting in. The passing that is so important to us is in fact basically a euphemism for conforming, and yet it is also a tool that makes our lives easier by allowing us to be perceived and accepted by others in the role that is ours. For Carla and her friends,

experiencing acceptance and understanding was probably itself a sense of achievement. Today, we should tackle our long-overdue emancipation – this “I am what I am.” This is one of my aims as an activist. I felt comfortable in Carla’s room; I would have liked to speak with her, as an eye-witness to history – what I have also become in the meantime. Carla has strengthened my conviction in the importance of another project, in addition to our emancipation: our unwritten trans* history, which I hope will help establish our identity. Having been accepted by society, we will only be truly emancipated when our self-determination and equal rights have been achieved, when we can be who we are, everywhere in the world, without any question. It’s about belonging. Reading the work of the psychologist Brené Brown, an expert in

questions about human vulnerability and our protection mechanisms, I came across an interesting observation. Young people were asked to think about the difference between conforming and belonging, and they came up with some amazing answers:

Belonging means being where you want to be and where others want you to be. *Conforming* means being where you want to be, without it mattering to others at all. *Belonging* means being accepted as you are. *Conforming* means being accepted because you are like others. I am me when I *belong*. I have to be like you when I *conform*.

NOTE TO CHAPTER 7

- 1 Note from the co-authors: Nora Eckert’s contribution should be viewed as that of an eyewitness, and we have therefore not enforced our usage on her. We chose not to use the asterisk after trans in this book, because for the most part we are writing only about people who wished to remain within a binary gender system. Here, however, Eckert is explicitly including nonbinary people by using the asterisk, reflecting a present-day Berlin setting.