

Identities

Annotated Bibliography

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Introduction

Because ‘identities’ is such a broad topic, this annotated bibliography focuses on just one example: trans identities. Trans studies, including trans history, is a dynamic and rapidly expanding field with roots in queer history, gender history and the history of medicine. At its broadest, this is a field about lives and ideas that go beyond the ‘gender binary’: the notion that ‘man’ and ‘woman’ are simple, unchanging categories into which every human being neatly fits from birth. Often, this means studying people whose bodies, self-expression or self-understanding didn’t fit into those categories – people who today might describe themselves as transgender, intersex, non-binary, or other related terms. The concept of social norms is an important one in trans history. In modern European contexts, we might see trans history as focusing on people who transgressed gender norms. However, in other times and places, other norms operated and included more than two gender categories. One major area of research, therefore, looks at the rise of the European gender binary and its impact, often in colonial contexts, on societies with other gender norms. Another major theme in trans history is how the field of medicine, including endocrinology, psychiatry and surgery, created diagnoses and treatment protocols over the course of the twentieth century, which distinguished between trans and intersex (psychological versus physical differences) and between trans and homosexual (gender versus sexuality). Increasingly, scholars are also writing the social history of trans life, looking at activism, community and biography in order to centre the experiences of trans people rather than the medical, legal and societal norms that often violently constrained their lives.

Overviews

Susan Stryker, 'Introduction: Trans* Studies Now', *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 7:3 (2020), pp. 299–305.

Susan Stryker is one of the founding figures of trans history. She co-edited *The Transgender Studies Reader* in 2006, published *Transgender History* in 2008, and in 2014, she and Paisley Currah co-founded *Transgender Studies Quarterly* (TSQ). In this essay, she introduces a special issue of TSQ and surveys the current state of the field.

Kit Heyam, *Before We Were Trans: A New History of Gender* (London: Basic Books, 2022).

This accessible book is global in scope, bringing together histories of gender diversity from the early modern era to the present in locations ranging from Japan to Angola to Britain. Heyam argues for an expansive version of trans history rooted in care for our subjects and openness to the diverse ways gender was lived and understood.

Approaches and methods

Greta LaFleur, Masha Raskolnikov and Anna Kłosowska (eds), *Trans Historical: Gender Plurality Before the Modern* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2021).

This edited collection challenges assumptions that trans history is largely about the time period after 1950. In addition to rich case studies, the essays in this collection reflect on methodology and, in particular, the relationship between the past and the present. M. W. Bychowski's chapter, 'The Transgender Turn: Eleanor Rykener Speaks Back', is especially important; it thinks about how historians ignored 'trans potentials' in the past and what we might do about that.

Kai Pyle, 'Naming and Claiming: Recovering Ojibwe and Plains Two-Spirit Language', *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 5:4 (2018), pp. 574–88.

Pyle uses linguistic analysis as well as historical research to construct this elegant reflection on the relationship between present-day queer and trans communities and past figures. The article develops the idea of trans*temporal kinship as a means of connection between contemporary and past trans and Two-Spirit Indigenous North Americans.

Jamey Jespersen, 'Trans Misogyny in the Colonial Archive: Re-Membering Trans Feminine Life and Death in New Spain, 1604–1821', *Gender & History*, 36:1 (2024), pp. 91–111.

The global diversity of gender forms, and the violence wrought against them, especially by colonial forces, is an important area of current research, with major works by Aren Aizura, Sandy O'Sullivan, Howard Chiang and Jessica Hinchy. Here, Jespersen examines criminal trials for sodomy in Mexico and Catholic missions in California, arguing that these records reveal a long history of violent trans misogyny, often resulting in death, but also traces of trans feminine survival.

Medicine and law

Jules Gill-Peterson, *Histories of the Transgender Child* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2018).

Using medical records from the United States, Gill-Peterson outlines the development of ideas about gender through the treatment of intersex and trans children in the twentieth century. She finds evidence of trans children surviving and being supported by their families and schools as early as the 1920s. Gill-Peterson's work builds on earlier scholarship by scholars such as Joanne Meyerowitz that studied the emergence of the medicalized category of 'transsexuality', but goes beyond it by looking at a longer time-span and foregrounding race.

Hil Malatino, *Queer Embodiment: Monstrosity, Medical Violence, and Intersex Experience* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2019).

The relationship between trans history and intersex history is a complex one, and Malatino's book, which combines autobiography with scholarship, is an excellent place to start to understand why. Using medical records, photographs and his own life history, Malatino traces the emergence of contemporary divisions between sex, gender and sexuality and argues cogently for the fundamental importance of trans and intersex histories for all histories of gender. Intersex history remains relatively neglected but within the British context, see also the work of David Griffiths.

Zoe Playdon, *The Hidden Case of Ewan Forbes: The Transgender Trial That Threatened to Upend the British Establishment* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021).

Assigned female at birth, Ewan Forbes lived his life as a man, undergoing early hormone therapy and becoming a doctor in his own right – before an inheritance case that turned on his gender nearly destroyed his life. Playdon uses this riveting story to tell the broader history of trans medicine and law in Britain. Students interested in this topic will also wish to consult Christine Burns's path-breaking edited collection of essays, *Trans Britain*.

Social histories of trans lives

C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

This landmark book explores the interrelationship of gender and race by considering Blackness and transness together in a North American context. Developing Hortense Spillers' concept of ungendering in new ways, this book is theoretically sophisticated. Students seeking an accessible starting point might look especially to chapter 4, 'A Nightmarish Silhouette', which examines media coverage of Black trans people in the middle of the twentieth century.

Nat Raha, 'Queer Memory in (Re)constituting the Trans Lesbian 1970s in the UK', in Glyn Davis and Laura Guy (eds), *Queer Print in Europe* (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2022), pp. 197–217.

A beautifully illustrated exploration of trans lesbian activism in the 1970s, this chapter is important because it challenges contemporary ideologies that seek to pit feminism against trans activism. It is part of a body of work exploring trans contributions to feminism as well as the rise of trans-exclusive movements in the UK by Sam Caslin, Ruth Pearce, Sonja Erikainen and Ben Vincent.

Conclusion

The ongoing focus on trans, queer and intersex people in contemporary political debates means that the study of this history is particularly urgent right now. Similar to other histories of gender and sexual minorities, a key part of trans history is addressing the claim that gender variation, or gender systems beyond the binary, are new and without historical precedent. Within the field itself, there has gradually been greater attention paid to contexts beyond Europe and North America and to the connections between gender, race and other forms of difference, but there remains much work to be done in both areas. Finally, there's a productive ongoing debate about the relationship between theoretical work – which focuses on topics like the nature of gender – and more empirical work – documenting the past lives and communities of trans people.

Additional citations

Aren Z. Aizura, *Mobile Subjects: Transnational Imaginaries of Gender Reassignment* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

Christine Burns (ed.), *Trans Britain: Our Journey from the Shadows* (London: Unbound, 2018).

- Sam Caslin, 'Trans Feminism and the Women's Liberation Movement in Britain, c. 1970–1980', *Gender & History*, 37:23 (2025), pp. 748–63.
- Howard Chiang, *Transtopia in the Sinophone Pacific* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021).
- David Andrew Griffiths, 'Diagnosing Sex: Intersex Surgery and "Sex Change" in Britain 1930–1955', *Sexualities*, 21:3 (2018), pp. 476–95.
- Jessica Hinchy, *Governing Gender and Sexuality in Colonial India: The Hijra, c. 1850–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).
- Joanne Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).
- Susan Stryker, *Transgender History (Second Edition): The Roots of Today's Revolution* (New York: Seal Press, 2017).
- Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (eds), *The Transgender Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 2006).
- Sandy O'Sullivan, 'The Colonial Project of Gender (and Everything Else)', *Genealogy*, 5:3 (2021), pp. 1–9.
- Ben Vincent, Sonja Erikainen and Ruth Pearce, 'TERF Wars: Feminism and the Fight for Transgender Futures', *The Sociological Review* 68: 4 (July 2020).