

# Trans

ALEXIS A. FERGUSON 

Princeton University, New Jersey, United States

IN their introduction to the 2008 “Trans-” special issue of *Women’s Studies Quarterly*, Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah, and Lisa Jean Moore describe two approaches to “trans” as a method of analysis, both of which bear on historical trans studies and can help describe Victorian studies’ engagement with the concept.<sup>1</sup> The first approach understands “trans” as a nominal category: a marker of identity, generally associated with a specific minority of people who have transitioned their sex or gender from one culturally distinct position to another. The second, for which the coeditors titled their issue, insists on the hyphenated “trans-” to highlight its broad utility as a prefix; trans- and “transing,” defined as “a practice that takes place within, as well as across or between, gendered spaces,” undermine the binary, associated with nominal transness, between trans mutability and non-trans “fixity.”<sup>2</sup> Through this approach, any body or gender, even the concepts of bodies and genders, may access and be analyzed through transness, no matter the availability of medical transition. With or without the hyphen, trans thus offers Victorianists two different but intertwined methods for studying gender in a historically bounded discipline: nominal, biographical work and theoretical, conceptual work.

In my experience, “trans” tends to evoke a paranoid understanding of the former approach in Victorianists: historicist worries of anachronism (the concept of transition did not exist, etc.), tinged with old-school feminist concerns regarding the value of (cis) womanhood as a political term (questioning the womanhood of Victorian women might undermine a feminist politics). Trans histories, though, generally engage their deployment of the adjective “trans” rigorously. From within Victorian studies, for example, Lisa Hager shows the utility of “fundamentally reconceptualiz[ing] our understanding of gender to account for the possibility of movement between, across, and among genders” by analyzing periodical press coverage of two “female husbands” who lived as men despite eventually being “revealed” as women.<sup>3</sup> Hager

---

**Alexis A. Ferguson** is a doctoral candidate in the Department of English and Program in Gender and Sexuality Studies at Princeton University.

*Victorian Literature and Culture*, Vol. 51, No. 3, pp. 527–530.

© The Author(s), 2023. Published by Cambridge University Press. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

doi:10.1017/S1060150323000268

illustrates that these gendered lives and bodies, even in the contemporary newspaper coverage of them, were not disguises to elude lesbophobia: what might we find if we recognize sex and gender as practices that are acted into existence, not necessarily predetermined by infantile genitals or reproductive capacity?

One limit to Hager's call, though, is that it evokes the minoritizing trans narrative: excavating figures from the British nineteenth century and naming them part of a trans history that continues into the present. This genealogical work is politically vital as anti-trans rhetoric continues to spread, justifying itself, in part, by the supposed ahistoricity of transness; I do not mean to question its value.<sup>4</sup> But, following Stryker, Currah, and Moore, Victorianists might also imagine "trans" as a vehicle between individual bodies and the population-wide functions of biopolitical sex and gender, which find expression in the evolutionary theory, developing social sciences, and nation- and race-making discourses of the Victorian era. Thinking with this "vertical axis" between material lives and governed populations, sex and gender are not pre-given categories but rather a "set of practices" that offer potential value to industry and capital, legal and scientific efforts to manage populations, and literary and philosophical formulations of ethical sociality.<sup>5</sup> Grace Lavery offers such an exploration in "Trans Realism," reading George Eliot's realist technique as an assertion of "the ubiquity of [sexed] bodily dysphoria," which rhetorically lumps readers in with the "clumsy, ugly people" we find, and must learn to love, in Eliot's novels.<sup>6</sup> Trans, then, allows us to trace the biopolitical construction of sexed and gendered coherence, or cisness, as it took shape: not, necessarily, to argue that all Victorians were trans, but rather to historicize Victorian sex as pre-cis, and thus allow Victorian sex to be *non-cis*.

While scholars of sexology generally trace the development of modern cisness to the early twentieth century, Victorianists are well positioned to expand upon earlier constructions of sex. One potential locale is the quest for "natural laws" in socio-scientific discourse.<sup>7</sup> Herbert Spencer outlines the import of natural laws in *First Principles* (1862), and his insistence that biological laws govern social sexual difference creates what may be productively called a theory of cis sex.<sup>8</sup> In "Theory of Population," Spencer describes an energetic conflict between personal development and reproductive capacity, which justifies his later claim that strenuous education and work would disadvantage the quality of future generations, with all the racial and ableist connotations thereof.<sup>9</sup> In this energy economy model, sexed social roles are secondary

to, and indeed mandated by, the function of the sexed reproductive system.<sup>10</sup> Rather than take Spencer's biological determinism at his word, a trans reading shows that these sexual laws of nature, and the naturalness of sex itself, discursively construct a biopolitical norm that breaks down even as it establishes itself through and as biological authority. For, if proper biological sex requires properly sexed social behavior, then biological sex *can be changed* by social behavior. The stability of sex cannot be assumed: Victorian sex comprised both physical and social traits, and social behavior is able to influence physical sex characteristics.<sup>11</sup> And, if sex may be changed by differently sexed behavior, a proliferation of sexes emerges in the Victorian archive.

We need more "trans" in Victorian studies. Neither "sex" nor "gender" were included in the first *VLC* Keywords issue, bespeaking Victorian studies' habit of not defining either and ultimately conflating the two, naturalizing cisness in our own scholarship and projecting cisnormativity into a time in which cisness as such did not exist.<sup>12</sup> Engaging transness will thus combat the biological essentialism not, as we have seen, of Victorian sex, but of Victorian studies. Trans accounts of sex and gender readily supplement feminist Victorian studies; trans methods will reinvigorate feminist topics by insisting on historically accurate, capacious definitions of sex and historicized understandings of gender, while providing urgent political motivation for an intersectional transfeminism against gendered oppression in all its forms.<sup>13</sup>

#### NOTES

1. Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah, and Lisa Jean Moore, "Introduction: Trans-, Trans, or Transgender?" *Women's Studies Quarterly* 36, nos. 3/4 (2008): 11–22.
2. Stryker, Currah, and Moore, "Introduction," 13.
3. Lisa Hager, "A Case for a Trans Studies Turn in Victorian Studies: 'Female Husbands' of the Nineteenth Century," *Victorian Review* 44, no. 1 (2018): 37.
4. For an analysis of this rhetoric of newness, see Jules Gill-Peterson, *Histories of the Transgender Child* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 1–34.
5. Stryker, Currah, and Moore, "Introduction," 14.
6. Grace Lavery, "Trans Realism, Psychoanalytic Practice, and the Rhetoric of Technique," *Critical Inquiry* 46, no. 4 (2020): 735;

- George Eliot, *Adam Bede*, edited by Carol A. Martin (1859; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 161.
7. On natural law in Victorian science, see Cynthia Eagle Russett, *Sexual Science: The Victorian Construction of Womanhood* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 133–40, 181–88.
  8. Herbert Spencer, *First Principles* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1862), 127–45.
  9. Herbert Spencer, “A Theory of Population Deduced from the General Law of Animal Fertility,” *Westminster Review* 57, no. 112 (April 1852): 492–501. See also “Physical Education” in Herbert Spencer, *Education, Intellectual, Moral and Physical* (London: G. Manwaring, 1861), 144–90.
  10. See Russett, *Sexual Science*, 104–29.
  11. See Spencer, *Education*, 179–88.
  12. “Cover and Front Matter,” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 46, nos. 3–4 (2018): f1–f7.
  13. On the history of gender, suggesting the anachronism of the term in Victorian studies, see Gill-Peterson, *Histories*, 97–127. On transfeminism, see Susan Stryker and Talia M. Bettcher, “Introduction: Trans/Feminisms,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 3, nos. 1–2 (2016): 5–14.

