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ABSTRACT: In recent years, autobiographical narratives by transgender migrants and refugees from Africa have emerged, such as Farah Abdi's *Never Arrive*, Neo Sandja's *Right Mind, Wrong Body*, and Rizi Xavier Timane's *An Unspoken Compromise*. This chapter examines these texts' geographical focus and the resurgence of the 'wrong body' trope, considering what the transgender asylum narrative offers to the 'trans travel narrative'. A key difference is the lack of a safe return — what I term the 'unsafe return'.

KEYWORDS: transgender refugee; trans travel narrative; trans autobiography; wrong body narrative; transgender Africa

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# Persistence

## Model Asylum Narratives and a Recognizable 'Transgenderness'

B CAMMINGA

Replete with geographical and geo-oriented vocabulary, the contours and substance of the term *transgender*[1] are defined by movement, mobility, borders, and migration. Not only is it a term that travels and morphs as it does so, but encoded in its very meaning is the perception that a body might have to migrate, both metaphorically and physically, to enter into possibility — a journey from point A to point B, along the shortest route. This journeying has perhaps been most famously described by Jay Prosser in *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (1998) as 'coming home', either to oneself or to the body that always should have been.[2] Thus, *transgender* often travels in the company of companions like *from* and *to*. Transitioning is often denoted, as Aren Aizura explains, as 'a one-way trajectory across a terrain in which the stuff of sex is divided into male and female territories, divided by the border or no man's land in between'.[3] There is, as Aizura further

1 I use *trans* and *transgender* interchangeably throughout this chapter.

2 Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 83.

3 Aren Z. Aizura, 'The Persistence of Transgender Travel Narratives', in *Transgender Migrations: The Bodies, Borders, and Politics of Transition*, ed. by Trystan T. Cotten (New York: Routledge, 2012), pp. 139–56 (p. 140) <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203808269>.

describes, an unyielding 'persistence' to this 'trans travel narrative' and its migratory metaphors.[4]

Although, in his initial analysis, Prosser was addressing transsexuality and the narrative of being 'trapped in the wrong body', there has been some slippage between what was termed *transsexuality* and what is more often now referred to as *transgender*. Autobiography has proven to be a key genre for the representation of transgender journeys, especially in relation to narratives of medical transition, where home in oneself is to be achieved through a process of leaving, or journeying out, and return. For Prosser, the 'metaphoric territorializing of gender and literal territorializations of physical space have often gone hand in hand' in trans narratives.[5] Early exemplars of this form include Lili Elbe's *Man into Woman: An Authentic Record of a Sex Change* (1933), often referred to as the first trans autobiography; Christine Jorgensen's *A Personal Autobiography* (1967), which followed some years later; and Jan Morris's *Conundrum* (1974). Travelling to Germany, Denmark, and Morocco, respectively, to rectify the wrong body, before returning to their countries of origin, is a narrative model that Lucas Crawford critiques.[6] Crawford characterizes the trans travel narrative as revolving around 'the safe return',[7] which aligns 'the metaphorical return to the protagonist's gendered home with an account of their arrival at their literal home'.[8] According to Crawford, this narrative model, invested in binary understandings of gender and an ontologically stable conceptualization of transness, closes off the potential for transition to be seen as 'a risky exploit or experiment in embodied selfhood'.[9] These narratives predominantly align with the established form and structure of medical case histories.

The medical case history is a coherent narrative of gender incongruence that has, until very recently, remained the prerequisite for

4 Ibid.

5 Prosser, *Second Skins*, p. 101.

6 Lucas Cassidy Crawford, 'Transgender without Organs?: Mobilizing a Geo-Affective Theory of Gender Modification', *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 36.3–4 (2008), pp. 127–43 <https://doi.org/10.1353/wsq.0.0092>.

7 Ibid., p. 128.

8 Aizura, 'The Persistence of Transgender Travel Narratives', p. 142.

9 Crawford, 'Transgender without Organs?', p. 128.

access to affirming healthcare. Initially, it functioned as the evidence or truth that a trans person would be required to present in order to verify and validate their trans identity. This evidence was to be presented in the form of a narrative or autobiography. Medical professionals thus functioned as the first audience at the heart of early trans narrative production. For Prosser, the autobiographical act is intrinsic to trans identity, and the initial autobiographical act is that which occurs in the 'clinician's office'.[10] The archetypal structure of this model fulfils a particular narrative organization of consecutive stages: 'suffering and confusion; the epiphany of self-discovery; corporeal and social transformation/conversion; and finally the arrival "home" — reassignment'.[11]

Appealing to trans and non-trans audiences alike, although perhaps for different reasons, these life stories have come to form a particular literary canon. Starting in the 2000s, however, a concerted effort has been made to move away from the constraints of early trans writing. Evan Vipond suggests that in contemporary texts, trans writers may 'relinquish their intelligibility' in order to 'allow for new understandings of trans identities, subjectivities, and embodiments', thus troubling the genre.[12] Of course, more recent narratives have also turned the gaze on the medical establishment, highlighting how it perpetuates pathologization. This critique has framed the trope of the wrong body as the outcome of having to explain trans life to cisgender audiences. Texts such as Paul B. Preciado's *Testo Junkie* (2013) and Julia Serano's *Whipping Girl* (2007) are perhaps the most salient examples of this turn. However, the ability to relinquish intelligibility that we see in such texts may only be accessible, as Sarah Ray Rondot points out, to individuals who are 'privileged by other identity vectors'.[13] These might include documentation or citizenship status, as well as white-

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 Evan Vipond, 'Becoming Culturally (Un)Intelligible: Exploring the Terrain of Trans Life Writing', *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, 34.1 (2019), pp. 19–43 (p. 4) <https://doi.org/10.1080/08989575.2019.1542813>.

13 Sarah Ray Rondot, '"Bear Witness" and "Build Legacies": Twentieth- and Twenty-First-Century Trans* Autobiography', *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, 31.3 (2016), pp. 527–51 (p. 537) <https://doi.org/10.1080/08989575.2016.1183339>.

ness, which has been extensively critiqued in the broader transgender studies literature.[14]

In the last decade, a series of trans autobiographies by African authors have emerged, potentially offering a new lens through which to consider the trans travel narrative. In this chapter, I focus on three such texts: Farah Abdullah Abdi's *Never Arrive* (2015); Neo L. Sandja's *Right Mind, Wrong Body* (2016); and Rizi Xavier Timane's *An Unspoken Compromise* (2017), recently republished as *Love Wins Out: My Journey as an African Transman* (*sic*) (2021).[15] Though not the first trans autobiographies to be published by authors from the African continent, each represents a first for their country of origin — Somalia/Kenya, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Nigeria. I argue that these texts adhere more closely to a more recent narrative model that, since the early 90s,[16] has emerged as a secondary space of trans narrative rendition — the asylum claim.[17] In what follows, I

14 See Katrina Roen, 'Transgender Theory and Embodiment: The Risk of Racial Marginalisation', *Journal of Gender Studies*, 10.3 (2001), pp. 253–63 <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589230120086467>; Emily Skidmore, 'Constructing the "Good Transsexual": Christine Jorgensen, Whiteness, and Heteronormativity in the Mid-Twentieth-Century Press', *Feminist Studies*, 37.2 (2011), pp. 270–300 <https://doi.org/10.1353/fem.2011.0043>; Salvador Vidal-Ortiz, 'Whiteness', *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 1.1–2 (2014), pp. 264–66 <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-2400217>; B Camminga, 'Where's Your Umbrella? Decolonialisation and Transgender Studies in South Africa', *Postamble*, 10.1 (2017), pp. 61–77.

15 Xavier chooses to use *transman* as a single term. It is widely accepted that there should be a space between *trans* and *man*, indicating that *trans* is an adjective used to further specify the noun *man*. See B Camminga, 'What Is Private about "Private Parts"? On Navigating the Violence of the Digital African Trans Refugee Archive', in *Queer and Trans African Mobilities: Migration, Asylum and Diaspora*, ed. by B Camminga and John Marnell (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), pp. 153–69 <https://doi.org/10.5040/9780755639021.ch-8>.

16 In 1995, a transgender woman from Algeria, known by the case name 'Ourbih', sought asylum in France. This is widely considered to have been one of the first claims to asylum made by a trans person. Since Ourbih there has been a growing global recognition of claims to asylum made on the basis of persecution due to gender identity and/or expression. See B Camminga, 'Ourbih's Legacy: Transgender Forced Displacement, Legal Boundaries, Lived Realities, and the Struggle for Recognition', in *Oxford Handbook of Intersectional Approaches to Migration, Gender, and Sexuality*, ed. by Gökce Yurdakul and others (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2025).

17 Fadi Saleh, 'Transgender as a Humanitarian Category: The Case of Syrian Queer and Gender-Variant Refugees in Turkey', *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly,* 7.1 (2020), pp. 37–55 <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-7914500>; Martha Balaguera, 'Trans-Migrations: Agency and Confinement at the Limits of Sovereignty', *Signs*, 43.4 (2018), pp. 641–64 <https://doi.org/10.1086/695302>; Jhana Bach, 'Assessing

outline the relatively recent emergence of published trans autobiographies by African authors and what distinguishes these three texts from this emergent canon. Drawing from the literature in migration studies, I discuss the contours and expectations of the asylum narrative for trans people. With a specific focus on how this is visible in the geographical investments of these texts and the resurgence of the trope of the wrong body — expressing within asylum what Leticia Sabsay calls 'a recognisable form of [ … ] transgenderness'[18] — I suggest that the trans asylum narrative is the trans travel narrative in the absence of the safe return, a phenomenon I term the 'unsafe return'.

## AFRICAN TRANS AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

There are only a handful of published book-length trans autobiographies by African authors, with the majority commercially published in English in South Africa. Published in 1998, Ugandan trans and intersex activist Julius Kaggwa's *From Juliet to Julius: In Search of My True Gender Identity* follows the author's early childhood, the discovery of his intersex variation, his transition, and his journey to acceptance in Uganda.[19] Though not an exclusively trans text — Kaggwa defines himself as 'an intersex man who went through a trans experience'[20] — it is read and considered as part of an African trans canon. The first exclusively trans text was an oral history project featuring archival material, images, body maps, and interviews documenting the lives of trans people in South Africa: *Trans: Transgender Life Stories from South Africa* (2009). Quite possibly the African continent's first trans autobiography, centring on the life of a singular person, was the Algerian publication *Mouzakarat*

Transgender Asylum Claims', *Forced Migration Review*, 42 (2013), pp. 34–36; Fatima Mohyuddin, 'United States Asylum Law in the Context of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity: Justice of the Transgendered?', *Hastings Women's Law Journal*, 12.2 (2001), pp. 387–410.

18 Leticia Sabsay, 'The Emergence of the Other Sexual Citizen: Orientalism and the Modernisation of Sexuality', *Citizenship Studies*, 16.5–6 (2012), pp. 605–23 (p. 611) <https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2012.698484>.

19 Julius Kaggwa, *From Juliet to Julius: In Search of My True Identity* (Kampala: Fountain Publishers, 1998).

20 Caroline Ausserer, 'Portrait of Julius Kaggwa, Intersex Activist from Uganda', blog.lsvd.de, 24 February 2022 <https://blog.lsvd.de/portrait-of-julius-kaggwa-intersex-activist-from-uganda/> [accessed 9 April 2024].

*Randa Al-Trans, or The Memoirs of Randa the Trans* (2010). Available in Arabic and co-authored with Lebanese journalist Hazem Saghieh, the book follows the life of Algerian activist Randa.[21]

These were followed by a run of trans autobiographies from South Africa, including Liberty Matthyse's self-published *A Darling's Journey to Liberty* (2016) and the first text by a Black trans man, Landa Mabenge's *Becoming Him: A Trans Memoir of Triumph* (2019).[22] A series of publications by white South Africans were also published during this period. These include Anastacia Tomson's *Always Anastacia: A Transgender Life in South Africa* (2016), Robert Hamblin's *Robert: A Queer & Crooked Memoir for the Not so Straight & Narrow* (2021), and Elise Bishop's *Twee Lewens* (*Two Lives*) (2022).[23] Following the life of Elise Bishop, who transitioned in the mid-1970s in South Africa, *Twee Lewens* is the first to be published in Afrikaans and documents the earliest life story thus far. Finally, in 2021, famed Nigerian author Akwaeke Emezi published *Dear Senthuran: A Black Spirit Memoir.*[24] Emezi, though they use the terms *non-binary* and *transgender*, considers themself to be an ogbanje, or 'an Igbo spirit that's born into a human body'.[25]

The three texts that are the focus of this chapter, though they form part of this canon, are distinct from the above in that they are all self-published, single-authored English language texts written from a diasporic perspective.[26] Initially published in 2017 as *An Unspoken*

21 Hazem Saghieh, *Mouzakarat Randa Al-Trans, or The Memoirs of Randa the Trans* (Beirut: Dar al-Saqi, 2010).

22 See Liberty Matthyse, *A Darling's Journey to Liberty* (Cape Town: self-published, 2016); and Landa Mabenge, *Becoming Him: A Trans Memoir of Triumph* (Johannesburg: Jacana Media, 2019).

23 See Anastacia Tomson, *Always Anastacia: A Transgender Life in South Africa* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2016); Robert Hamblin, *Robert: A Queer and Crooked Memoir for the Not so Straight or Narrow* (Cape Town: Melinda Ferguson, 2021); and Elise Bishop, *Twee Lewens* (Hermanus, SA: Hemel & See, 2022). Tomson's memoir has been mistakenly referred to as the 'the first transgender memoir to come out of Africa'. See Germaine de Larch, 'Transgender Identity: The Context and Intersectionality of Identity', *Gender Questions*, 5.1 (2017), pp. 1–4 (p. 2).

24 Akwaeke Emezi, *Dear Senthuran: A Black Spirit Memoir* (London: Riverhead Books, 2021).

25 Ibid., p. 11.

26 On the digital emergence of an African transgender refugee diaspora, see B Camminga, 'When the Homo Deamon Went Digital: Writing Africa's Transgender Refugee Dias-

*Compromise*, Timane's 2021 republication of his autobiography under the new name *Love Wins Out: My Journey as an African Transman* (*sic*) adds an extra chapter addressing the healing of his relationship with his parents. Born into a profoundly Christian family, headed by a widely respected and well-known Nigerian military leader, Timane moved to the US to escape his family and their desires for him to marry and become a 'normal woman'.[27] The book follows Timane through his discomfort in childhood and the realization that he was a boy, but with no language to explain this to his parents, who made several attempts to exorcize what they understood to be his 'demon of homosexuality'.

Published a year before *Unspoken Compromise*, Neo L. Sandja's *Right Mind, Wrong Body* (2016) carries several similar themes to Timane's. Tracing the author's childhood in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and his eventual 'escape' to the US in 2004 after also enduring an exorcism at the hands of his family, the narrative highlights his struggles and resilience. The book tells a similar journey of his self-discovery, trans manhood, relationship to spirituality, and living as an undocumented migrant.

The final text, Farah Abdullah Abdi's *Never Arrive* (2015), diverges from the other two in several ways, not least because Abdi is a trans woman and a recognized refugee. Abdi, born in Somalia, was also a minor when she journeyed from Kenya via Uganda, South Sudan, Sudan, and Libya to Malta. Abdi's text reads as an unfinished autobiography, ending with her arrival in Malta. Though she had already begun transitioning by the time the text was published, the book itself largely refers to her sexuality, albeit broadly conceived. In interviews, at book launches, and in her subsequent written work, Abdi refers to her leaving as a result of her gender identity.[28] She has also read her trans identity back into her book on public platforms, reiterating that the book is, in fact, about her journey as a trans woman.[29] Most regularly,

pora', *Communication, Culture and Critique*, 17.3 (2024), pp. 213–16 <https://doi.org/10.1093/ccc/tcae007>.

27 Rizi Xavier Timane, *An Unspoken Compromise: My Story of Gender and Spiritual Transition* (n.p.: self-published, 2017), p. 29.

28 *Faarax Xuseen Cabdi Ama Kim Abdi*, dir. by sspamediacom, online video recording, YouTube, 25 March 2020 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=agjsTjRBTkg> [accessed 7 October 2023].

29 Ibid.

she reads the following excerpt from *Never Arrive*, substituting in 'trans woman': 'I have been told many times by family, friends, colleagues and strangers that I am a black, African, refugee, Muslim, *trans woman*; that I am outside the norms accepted by society.'[30] As with Timane's second edition, which repeats the first but adds two new chapters covering his reconciliation with his parents and the birth of his daughter, and substitutes 'Transman' (*sic*) into the title, I read Abdi's autobiography, written at sixteen and published at nineteen, as only the beginning of her story.

## RIGHT GEOGRAPHY

Asylum is a complex, bureaucratic, and often lengthy process. For transgender people, it is a process distinctively constructed on narrative. The 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees provides a singular, universally applicable definition of a refugee. The Convention, offering five grounds on which a person may claim asylum, defines a refugee as follows:

> Any person who [ … ] owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.

When a refugee status determination officer[31] engages with an applicant who makes a claim on the basis of gender identity, the officer tries to determine whether that applicant belongs to a particular social group — in this case, transgender people — and whether, on this basis, they have a well-founded fear of being persecuted in their country of origin. As Laurie Berg and Jenni Millbank make clear, refugee claims based upon any of the other five grounds 'will more commonly have some form of independent verification of group membership'.[32] In contrast, claims to belong to a particular social group are far more difficult

30 Farah Abdullah Abdi, *Never Arrive* (Malta: self-published, 2015), p. 17, my emphasis.

31 This position might also be termed *asylum officer* or *asylum official*.

32 Laurie Berg and Jenni Millbank, 'Constructing the Personal Narratives of Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Asylum Claimants', *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 22.2 (2009), pp. 195–223 (p. 196) <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fep010>.

to prove and depend upon the presentation, through narrative, 'of a very internal form of self-identity'.[33]

In this narrative process, claimants relive trauma as part of a truth-telling exercise. However, there are very few ways to evidence this truth offered through narrative. The audience for the narrative holds the power over its narrative schema. The power dynamics of asylum 'dictate that the construction of the applicant's life story cannot challenge foundational tenets of the decision-maker's understanding of the world'.[34] Stephanie Hsu reminds us that the asylum narrative has two audiences. The first is the nation state, represented by the refugee status determination officer, which elicits the official account. Indeed, Sudeep Dasgupta frames the interpretation of these accounts by the law as a form of 'reading'.[35] The second is the community or public into which a transgender person desires to assimilate. This public also demands a narrative that explains the applicant's presence.[36] There are two critical elements to this narrative. First, it must follow a linear path of identity development from persecution and repression in the country of origin to freedom and liberation in the country of arrival. Second, it must fit within the audience's available knowledge frameworks or, more succinctly, be culturally intelligible to a largely non-trans audience.

This linear trajectory is evident in these three texts through the types of social proof used to validate these narratives, emphasizing the specific geographic investments of asylum and the authority of the countries of arrival in the first few pages. Early trans autobiographies often carried endorsements from doctors or clinicians involved in treatment. For example, the preface for Elbe's *Man into Woman: An Authentic Record of a Sex Change* (1933) is provided by medical doctor and sexologist Norman Haire, while Jorgensen's *A Personal Autobiog-*

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid., p. 197.

35 Sudeep Dasgupta, 'Sexual and Gender-Based Asylum and the Queering of Global Space: Reading Desire, Writing Identity and the Unconventionality of the Law', in *Refugee Imaginaries: Research Across the Humanities*, ed. by Emma Cox and others (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), pp. 86–103 (p. 87) <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781474443210-009>.

36 Stephanie Hsu, 'Exotic Spectacle in *Tara's Crossing*, a Transgender Asylum Narrative', in *Queer Exoticism*, ed. by David Powell and Tamara Powell (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), pp. 81–91.

*raphy* (1967) carries a foreword by Harry Benjamin. Abdi's foreword is provided by Cecile Malmström, who in 2015 was the European Commissioner for Trade at the European Commission. Sandja's book is endorsed by Blackfoot/Latinx American writer Max Wolf Velario, author of *The Testosterone Files* (2006), widely considered the first published autobiography by a 'trans Indigenous person'. Finally, *An Unspoken Compromise* is endorsed by US-based social justice and independent reporting non-profit *Truthout.* While doctors or clinicians may have provided social proof (as endorsements do) of early autobiographies, we might cumulatively read the endorsements of a European Commissioner, an Indigenous US-based trans man, and a US-based media non-profit as indexing a different kind of social proof, one which links intelligibility to belonging, in the absence of the safe return.

Relatedly, regarding geographic investment, a stark contrast exists between the framing of countries of origin and countries of arrival. This appears most explicitly in Timane and Sandja, but it is also visible to a lesser degree in Abdi. Asylum narratives must emphasize the impossibility of the return and the probability of persecution if this happens. As a result, the key to these narratives is the repudiation of the country of origin and the espousal of a sense of gratitude for the possibility of safety in the new country. David Murray describes this phenomenon as the 'migration to liberation nation narrative',[37] emphasizing the contrast between the gift of freedom and the progress of rights in countries of arrival, and the perceived backwardness of (post)colonial national cultures in countries of origin.

All three texts frame countries of arrival as spaces of freedom or potential freedom, contrasting them with countries of origin as backward in various respects, particularly in Timane and Sandja's narratives. Abdi, reflecting on Kenya, states, 'I clearly knew that what was home for everybody else would never be home for me.'[38] However, while Abdi hints at the complexities of Kenya and Somalia, where survival seemed impossible, and describes her journey as a choice between freedom and death, Timane and Sandja predominantly refer to 'Africa' rather

37 David Murray, 'The (Not so) Straight Story: Queering Migration Narratives of Sexual Orientation and Gendered Identity Refugee Claimants', *Sexualities*, 17.4 (2014), pp. 451–71 <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460714524767>.

38 Abdi, *Never Arrive*, p. 37.

than their specific countries of origin. Africa, for Timane and Sandja, is portrayed as a space of 'corrective rape', 'religious fundamentalism', and as a place where the perpetrators of crimes, 'via the police and courts [...] go unpunished.'[39] For both Sandja and Timane, Africa signifies backwardness, lack of acceptance, and harshness, and as with Abdi, it is a space of unfreedom. Foregrounding his arrival in America as necessary to escape expectations that he be 'a normal woman', Timane explains his relief at arriving in the US, a place that 'was very, very, very far away'.[40] For Sandja, not only is the US some distance from Africa, but it is a space of possibility where he might find himself and find healing. Referring to his exorcisms, Sandja explains: 'If the church couldn't do it, hopefully, the American doctors could.'[41] Thus, not only are these geographical spaces of freedom distinct from an Africa where the church, closed mindedness, and gendered expectations hold sway, but they are also invested with particular medical possibilities. It is to these medical possibilities or the trope of the wrong body that I turn to in the next section.

## WRONG BODY

In the early years, trans authors like Elbe, Jorgenson, and Morris were called on to explain themselves in ways culturally intelligible to a larger non-trans public.[42] Centring the voices of white trans women[43] for whom surgery, travel, and publication were attainable possibilities, texts forming the early canon of trans autobiography narrativized their authors' lives through the limiting pathological rhetoric available.[44] At the time, cultural intelligibility was crucial to establishing the humanity of these authors. Thus, it was of the utmost importance to finesse

39 Timane, *An Unspoken Compromise*, p. 179.

40 Ibid., p. 45.

41 Neo L. Sandja, *Right Mind, Wrong Body: The Ultimate Trans Guide to Being Complete and Living a Fulfilled Life* (n.p.: Light Publishers, 2016), p. 26.

42 Sasha Kruger and Sayantani DasGupta, 'Embodiment in [Critical] Auto|biography Studies', *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, 33.2 (2018), pp. 483–87 (p. 485) <https://doi.org/10.1080/08989575.2018.1445608>.

43 Heath Fogg Davis, 'Sex-Classification Policies as Transgender Discrimination: An Intersectional Critique', *Perspectives on Politics*, 12.1 (2014), pp. 45–60 <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592713003708>.

44 Rondot, '"Bear Witness" and "Build Legacies"', p. 532.

the narrative away from constructions of 'freak' or 'pervert' to 'diagnosable', 'treatable', and 'respectable'.[45]

Such narratives became 'legible and legitimate through their continued repetition',[46] creating what Prosser describes as a 'narrative map' that others might follow.[47] These early texts were constructed around a set of 'recognizable clichés and conventions'.[48] Among these was the notion of being 'born in the wrong body', alongside childhood stories of consistent and confusing cross-gender identification. Clare Hemmings refers to these as 'technologies' of the genre, so consistently 'reproduced that they are understood to "speak for themselves" without further elaboration'.[49] These autobiographies and their wrong bodies became the framework through which trans existence became culturally intelligible.

The power (and persistence) of the wrong body narrative lies in its recognizability, legibility, and cultural intelligibility, perhaps all the more so in a system like asylum, which relies on narrative to ascertain truth. As migration scholars make clear, only those individuals who can adapt to 'Western-style identities and narratives' can cross or find refuge.[50] Thus, it should be unsurprising that the wrong body, intertwined with medicalization, plays a central role in these narratives of refuge written from the position of diaspora. This centrality is highlighted by Sandja's choice of title, *Right Mind, Wrong Body*. Addressing potential controversy, Sandja clarifies his choice of the title, explaining it's 'not because I believe I am a defect of humanity, but because it does describe a medical condition. I have been diagnosed with gender dysphoria and have taken the medical steps necessary to align my body to my correct gender.' [51]

45 Vipond, 'Becoming Culturally (Un)intelligible', p. 11.

46 Ibid., p. 4.

47 Prosser, *Second Skins*, p. 140.

48 Juliet Jacques, 'Forms of Resistance: Uses of Memoir, Theory, and Fiction in Trans Life Writing', *Life Writing*, 14.3 (2017), pp. 357–70 (p. 359) <https://doi.org/10.1080/14484528.2017.1328301>.

49 Clare Hemmings, 'Telling Feminist Stories', *Feminist Theory*, 6.2 (2005), pp. 115–39 <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700105053690>.

50 Alexander Dhoest, 'Learning to Be Gay: LGBTQ Forced Migrant Identities and Narratives in Belgium', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 45.7 (2019), pp. 1075–89 <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2017.1420466>.

51 Sandja, *Right Mind, Wrong Body*, p. x.

As Murray makes clear, 'replicating the hegemonic narrative is an important component of the model refugee identity that is circulated in media and stories about successful refugee claim hearings.'[52] Swapping the clinician's office for that of the refugee determination officer, being 'trapped in the wrong body' remains the most comprehensible narrative description of trans life for non-trans audiences.

Timane explains to his audience, via a letter to his parents in the book, 'I have never actually been a lesbian but have always been a transgendered [*sic*] person, meaning that while my outer body has been female, my inner being and my brain are, and have been since before I came out of the womb completely male.'[53] Similarly, Sandja writes:

> Here I was, someone who had grown up in a conservative country in the middle of Africa — someone who knew nothing about sexual orientation while growing up, let alone gender identity. At the age of 26, I was suddenly aware that I wasn't a freak after all, and that there was a reason that I had always felt strange in my own body [...]. The DSM [Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders] estimates, as of writing this, that one in 30,000 males and one in 100,000 females are transgender. That number seems insignificant to most people, but to me, even if that number was 10 people in the entire world, my life would still have had a different meaning.[54]

Abdi, though in less directly medicalized language, refers to an 'essence' of self connected to femininity that was not acceptable within her native Somali community.[55] We can, perhaps, read the beginnings of this approach in *Never Arrive*, a book which, like those of Timane and Sandja, is the result of sessions with a psychological counsellor.[56] For both Timane and Sandja, the US not only becomes home but is a place that allows for homecoming. It is where the wrong body might be diagnosed and corrected, and thus represents the right geography as

52 Murray, 'The (Not so) Straight Story', pp. 465–66.

53 Timane, *An Unspoken Compromise*, pp. 81–82.

54 Sandja, *Right Mind, Wrong Body*, p. 68.

55 Abdi, *Never Arrive*, pp. 31–32.

56 Fabio Flepp, 'Reisegeschichten — Ein Leben voller Träume', *Schweizer Radio und Fernsehen* (*SRF*), 10 November 2015 <https://www.srf.ch/sendungen/reisegeschichten/reisegeschichten-ein-leben-voller-traeume> [accessed 7 October 2023].

an antidote to the wrong body. Contrary to Prosser's understanding of the return, where gender and geography align after an outward venture, there is no going back.

## THE UNSAFE RETURN

Asylum, by its very definition, is a risky exploit, and indeterminacy is a constitutive element. As Jacqueline Bhabha (2002) describes it,

> most refugees fleeing to safety in developed states do not arrive with a ready guarantee of access to enduring human rights. Rather, they enter as 'asylum seekers' — a temporary and increasingly disenfranchised category of non-citizen who need to establish their eligibility for refugee status before they can enjoy the prospect of long-term safety and nondiscriminatory treatment.[57]

While the three texts in question closely adhere to the model of the trans travel narrative, the presence of this risk and indeterminacy, consistent throughout, presents a critical difference. Returning to Crawford's critique, outlined in the introduction to this chapter, the trans asylum narrative certainly illustrates the ubiquity and ongoing power of the model of the trans travel narrative to explain trans life to an intended audience. However, migration in pursuit of asylum, where becoming is imagined in countries of refuge to be illustrated through a believable trans narrative, is a risky exploit. This risk is evident not only in the decision to flee but also in what we might term the 'unsafe return'. In contrast to the alignment, triumph, and homecoming of the safe return, the unsafe return is marked by fear and the potential for repudiation, deportation, and denial.

Part of Crawford's critique of Prosser concerns the question of indeterminacy and its absence in Prosser's framing. Unlike the trans travel narrative, which presents 'gendered indeterminacy within a spatialised elsewhere' such as Germany, Denmark, or Morocco, indeterminacy in these narratives is a constitutive element not only of asylum

57 Jacqueline Bhabha, 'Internationalist Gatekeepers?: The Tension Between Asylum Advocacy and Human Rights', *Harvard Human Rights Journal*, 15 (2002), pp. 155–81 (p. 155) <https://journals.law.harvard.edu/hrj/wp-content/uploads/sites/83/2020/06/15HHRJ155-Bhabha.pdf> [accessed 22 July 2024].

but also of countries of origin.[58] Rather than being resolved in the moment of the 'safe return', gendered indeterminacy serves as a spectre that embodies countries of origin — a haunting potentiality of asylum denial and deportation. For Abdi, this non-alignment with home and the spectre of the unsafe return is seen most clearly when she explains that her journey towards 'happiness' and her 'true identity' could not be found in nor ever align with a place like Kenya: 'I clearly knew that what was home for everybody else would *never* be home for me.'[59] For Sandja, we might read the spectre of the 'unsafe return' in his description of his journey, in which he emphasizes that 'there's no turning back':

> There is a point during each journey where the traveller realizes that the decision has to be made that will completely alter the outcome of the journey. It's a very significant moment because once it's been reached and once it's passed, there's no turning back. That point for me was when I realized I was Trans and chose to transition despite what I might lose, because I had everything to gain: my true self.[60]

Sandja's narrative vividly illustrates the uncertainty and risk of striving for a life amidst the looming shadow of the unsafe return. At one point, he finds himself navigating life in the US as an undocumented migrant, highlighting the challenges and vulnerabilities faced by trans individuals seeking safety. Perhaps nowhere is the unsafe return made more evident and explicit than in Timane's narration of Africa in the final pages of his book. In stark contrast to the life he has found in the US, Timane agglomerates the continent into a place where violence, rape, and murder are indiscriminately inflicted upon those seen to be 'deviant' or 'non-conformist',[61] where 'cultural patriarchy and religious fundamentalism' prevails, and where 'the police and courts [ … ] allow the perpetrators to go unpunished'.[62] The unsafe return is a critical element of the trans asylum narrative, distinguishing it from the model of the trans travel narrative. Though perhaps not in the way Crawford

58 Aizura, 'The Persistence of Transgender Travel Narratives', p. 153.
59 Abdi, *Never Arrive*, pp. 37–38, my emphasis.
60 Sandja, *Right Mind, Wrong Body*, p. 83.
61 Timane, *An Unspoken Compromise*, p. 193.
62 Ibid., p. 179.

intends, this difference opens up a consideration of indeterminacy and risk, while illustrating the ongoing power of linearity and intelligibility.

## CONCLUSION: ASYLUM, THE RISKY EXPLOIT

The recognized refugee is one who has 'successfully interiorized these identity models and narratives', where an intelligible version of transgender identity is not only necessary but must also be accompanied by a desire for the state as a site of freedom, protection, and home.[63] Sandy Stone warns, in her critique of the scholarly literature on early trans autobiographies, that trans people are not simply dupes of the systems they encounter, whether they be medical or otherwise, but necessarily use the tools at hand to narrate their lives and experiences into reality. For Stone, it is important to ask: for whom are these narratives constructed?[64] Indeed, Abdi offers a crucial reminder of these authors' agency and ability to reshape and narrate their stories even beyond publication, as she integrates her trans journey back into the text.

In these three texts, home is a place one flees, and borders are not merely metaphors but genuine physical sites of geopolitical power and un/belonging. As a result, in this essay I have suggested that these trans narratives of becoming are unable to pivot on the safe return. Instead, they foreground the spectre of the unsafe return, presenting a secondary model of the traditional trans narrative. For these three authors, as trans people who have sought refuge in the Global North, I suggest there is a necessity to author 'a coherent narrative that is recognizable and intelligible to their readers'.[65] Trans studies scholar Eliza Steinbock reminds us that 'what is missing in trans origin myths and interpretations of their existence [ … ] is an appreciation for how trans subjects narrate and represent their lives and thereby model the

63 Dhoest, 'Learning to Be Gay', p. 1087.

64 Sandy Stone, 'The *Empire* Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto', *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies*, 10.2 (1992), pp. 150–76 <https://doi.org/10.1215/02705346-10-2_29-150>.

65 Vipond, 'Becoming Culturally (Un)Intelligible', pp. 4–5.

available conceptual models of gendered embodiment'.[66] Placing the literature in migration and trans studies in conversation, I suggest we might not only appreciate but also recognize the conceptual model being transposed from the clinician's office to that of the refugee status determination officer, as well as understand the reasons behind this revitalization. For trans applicants to successfully navigate a system such as asylum, which leaves them highly vulnerable,[67] 'they must quickly learn these narratives and the powerful structures within which they are located with the result that the migration stories are compelled to contain statements which hue closely to the hegemonic narrative while simultaneously complicating it.'[68]

These three texts are shaped by the interplay between the authors' needs and the state's demands, reflecting a negotiation of power structures. The trope of the wrong body provides the first pillar of articulation in the well-worn and widely understood narrative construction of the self. As with early writers, this is the narrative that has, in the past, most readily fostered 'acceptability in society'.[69] While these texts do not directly challenge the asylum narrative as a form — indeed, they are compelled to reproduce it — they do complicate its requirements by illustrating its troubling origins and emphasizing the enduring power of its reproduction. This complexity, as it relates to international protection, merits serious consideration by refugee and migration scholars. In the shadow of the unsafe return, the narrative is constructed for an audience tasked with extending not only their understanding but their refuge. Without the possibility of a homecom-

66 Eliza Steinbock, *Shimmering Images: Trans Cinema, Embodiment, and the Aesthetics of Change* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), p. 27 <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781478004509>.

67 See Susannah Hermaszewska and others, 'Lived Experiences of Transgender Forced Migrants and Their Mental Health Outcomes: Systematic Review and Meta-Ethnography', *BJPsych Open*, 8.3 (2022) <https://doi.org/10.1192/bjo.2022.51>; B Camminga, 'Competing Marginalities and Precarious Politics: A South African Case Study of NGO Representation of Transgender Refugees', *Gender, Place & Culture*, 31.9 (2024), pp. 1293–1310 <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2022.2137473>; and B Camminga, 'Withholding the Letter: Transgender Asylum Seekers, Legal Gender Recognition, and the UNHCR Mandate', *Journal of Refugee Studies*, published online 8 July 2024 <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/feae058>.

68 David Murray, 'The (Not so) Straight Story', p. 454.

69 Rondot, '"Bear Witness" and "Build Legacies"', p. 534.

ing pivot, these asylum seekers must adeptly navigate and negotiate the hegemonic narrative, reclaiming it as their own. In contrast to the typical trans travel narrative, this model, which foregrounds home in exile, is structured on indeterminacy and is only made possible through the risky exploit, the daring journey to freedom, that undergirds trans becoming.[70]

70 I would like to thank my colleagues at the ICI Berlin Institute for Cultural Inquiry for their valuable contributions to multiple drafts of this paper. I would also like to thank Brenna Munro for her incredible generosity in engaging with this chapter and for her encouragement.

RESPONSE BY BEN WOODARD

The question that took root in my mind after reading this essay was whether there is, or should be, some formal notion of transgender identity. Furthermore, if transgender identity (at least as a theoretical object and not as a blanket for lived experience) does have a shared formal concept, would this imply or lend credence to a narrative theory of the self? Bearing in mind that various forms of narrative may have general models due to the forced appeasement of medical authorities, and that they may divert from these models for people who can afford them to, does it make sense to talk about trans identity in a generic sense? One could rely upon a social-constructivist mode, but given the role of narrative and self-identification, this might prove to be of limited use.

The question is fraught with all kinds of traps. Trans identity can be seen as merely an example of queerness, as is the case for Judith Butler, and there is also the problem of self-identification vis-à-vis other categories.[71] Then there is the question as to whether there are limits to the self-construction of identity,[72] as well as the all-too-easy critique from certain vulgar or 'middlebrow' Marxists, who see notions of the self-construction of identity as 'merely' late-capitalist self-fashioning.[73] If this minefield can be circumvented, it remains to be seen whether it makes sense to have or to recognize a formal theory of transness as narrativity — can it be a concern for those outside transgender experience without being amenable to authorities of recognition like courts and medical boards?[74]

71 On these first two points see Amy Marvin, 'A Brief History of Transphilosophy', *Contingent Magazine*, 21 September 2019 <https://contingentmagazine.org/2019/09/21/trans-philosophy/> [accessed 23 July 2024].

72 One is reminded of the controversy over Isabel Fall's 'I Sexually Identify as an Attack Helicopter', a story published in (and later withdrawn from) *Clarkesworld* magazine in January 2020.

73 See the editors' introduction to *Transgender Marxism*, ed. by Jules Joanne Gleeson and Elle O'Rourke (London: Pluto Press, 2021), pp. 1–32 <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1n9dkjc.4>.

74 Here it is also important to remember Susan Stryker's distinction between the discourse on transness and the scholarly works and writings of trans-identified people. See Susan Stryker, '(De)Subjugated Knowledges: An Introduction to Transgender Studies', in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. by Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 1–17.

One possibility comes from Xandra Metcalfe, who puts forward the idea of a 'primordial transness', in which cis-hetero identity is not the default but rather is simply the most conditioned form of identity.[75] If the matrix of sex/gender/desire is underdetermined at birth, then the narrative theory of the self, however it is engaged, takes agential notice of this indeterminacy of supposedly naturalized categories, or even socially constrained correlations between bodies, aesthetics, desires, and so on. Following this, one has to then ask what narrativity means in terms of the construction of one's identity as opposed to the writing or producing of that identity through various means of autobiography, autofiction, and fiction.[76] Here it might make sense to clarify what the narrative theory of the self, or narrative identity, is.

The narrative theory of the self, in its broadest terms, is about processing one's experiences as temporally ordered, thematically interlinked, and potentially having a direction or a purpose. Implied in this is the notion that there is a structure, or at least a capacity, of agency or individuality that assembles and works over these experiences, separately from having them — or, in other words, that there is some self-operator that makes the narrative out of memories, experiences, events, and so on. This implies a split between the idea of someone as a human being and that of a self as a kind of narrative function. As Peter Goldie puts it:

> [T]he idea of a narrator in an episode of autobiographical narrative thinking in a person narrative is not that of a homuncular entity [...], nor is it an entity that is necessarily stable. The narrative sense of self is the sense of self had by the narrator; and this self is, simply, me now as thinker, looking backwards at my narratable past, or forwards to my narratable future.[77]

75 Xandra Metcalfe, '"Why Are We Like This?": The Primacy of Transsexuality', in *Transgender Marxism*, ed. by Gleeson and O'Rourke, pp. 219–29 <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1n9dkjc.17>.

76 See Jordy Rosenberg, 'Afterword: One Utopia, One Dystopia', in *Transgender Marxism*, ed. by Gleeson and O'Rourke, pp. 259–95 <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1n9dkjc.19>.

77 Peter Goldie, *The Mess Inside: Narrative, Emotion, and the Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 131 <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199230730.001.0001>.

For Goldie what is important is 'empathic access', in the sense that one (as the narrator) may feel closer to, or further away from, one's self as a body or as a human. While some theorists of the identity theory of the self will insist upon the existence of a stable identity over time, such that the narrator may refer to changes of the body or of the embodied self, this is not necessary in Goldie's case, where it is the emotional or affective strands of those events that constitute the self, more than structural stability. At the same time, Goldie emphasizes that it is important to distinguish the narrative theory of the self from the various fictionalizing tendencies of autobiography and the like.

For Goldie, the desire to push the narrative theory of the self towards fictionalizing tendencies (that we have control, narrative closure, that our life belongs to a genre, etc.) is more often than not a response to the unthinkability of contingency and the supposed disenchantment of the modern world.[78]

This would seem to dovetail with Jordy Rosenberg's claim that autofiction (or autobiography) becomes a trap for trans-identified people and that subversion of the trope requires breaking the genre from within. One of the texts Rosenberg names is that of Kai Cheng Thom, who explicitly describes their book *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars* as being written against the expectations of cis-heteronormative audiences. And, also to Goldie's point, Thom says in an interview about the book:

> I wanted to be real about the kinds of experiences that trans women have out there in the world. Even though the book is a fantasy, it is only fantasy in the sense that there are surreal elements in it. The emotions and sensations are all true, are all drawn exactly from my life. And honestly, some of the situations are not that fictionalized in the sense that trans women do get involved in violence.[79]

It would seem that certain forms of trans identity fashion themselves as exposing the formal reflectivity of identity in general in such a way

78 Ibid., pp. 171–72.

79 Frankie de la Cretaz, 'Author Kai Cheng Thom on Writing a New Kind of Transgender Memoir', *Teen Vogue*, 5 April 2017 <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/author-kai-cheng-thom-on-writing-a-new-kind-of-transgender-memoir> [accessed 23 July 2024].

that indexes violence at the level of the social for outwardly embodying living against the grain (as Metcalfe puts it). If this is the case then it would seem that more overtly fictional narratives of transness will address the resistance of cis-heteronormativity to narratives that imply that they have, in terms of narrative identity, chosen not to have an authorial voice in their own life.

Nowhere is this clearer (I think) than in terms of trans horror (especially dystopian horror). For instance, Alison Rumfitt's *Brainwyrms* suggests that transphobia is the result of a parasite-infected pseudo-Lovecraftian cult of powerful British elites. Errol Harris's gothic horror *Leech* can be read as a similar analogy, depicting a scenario in which all medical professionals are in fact humans controlled by a brain parasite. Or, from a more utopian angle, Yoon Ha Lee's *Ninefox Gambit* series of books play with gender fluidity in the wake of consciousness's becoming uploadable and downloadable into new bodies.

Formal flexibility or plasticity of the self inverts the wrong body narrative to become one of an unacknowledged formal self that one cannot activate if there is an assumption of 'naturalness', essences, or scientific 'facts'.

My hope here is that this complicates the notion of cis-heteronormative negativity, viewing the transnarrative as proof.

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