



Trans bodies, trans selves:
A resource by and for transgender communities,
edited by Laura Erickson-Schroth (2nd edition)

Reviewed by Tiffany Sostar



Tiffany Sostar is a narrative therapist and community worker living as an uninvited guest on Treaty 7 land (in Calgary, Alberta, Canada). Tiffany is bisexual, nonbinary, non-monogamous, neurodivergent and disabled. They are particularly interested in “insider” practice and in complicating the binary between insider and outsider, acknowledging and attending to how they can be insider to some parts of community, and outsider to other parts of that same community. They value how there is difference and specificity even in communities of shared identity and experience. Hostility towards trans, nonbinary and gender nonconforming communities continues to escalate. For the next long while, Tiffany is undertaking a series of community projects to create a body of narrative responses in support of trans lives. This work includes their current PhD studies at The University of Melbourne. They love collective narrative practice and documentation. Tiffany can be contacted care of Dulwich Centre

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Abstract

Tiffany Sostar reviews *Trans bodies, trans selves: A resource by and for transgender communities*, edited by Laura Erickson-Schroth (2022, 2nd edition). Oxford University Press. 728pp. ISBN 9780190092726.

Key words: *trans; transgender; nonbinary; gender-expansive; collective document; book review; narrative practice*

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Looking through *Trans bodies, trans selves* as a nonbinary person is exciting, energising, emotional ... this book presents a wide-ranging and welcoming view of trans and gender-expansive (T/GE) experience.

While I read the book through the lens of my own experience and saw resonances in the pages, I believe the value of this book extends beyond the parts that resonate with an individual reader's experience. Accounts of differing and disparate experiences across transness offer something precious: an opportunity to learn from those with lived expertise.

I hope this review will inspire other readers to pick it up. Flip through it. Be moved by it. Become briefly immersed in some of the richness of difference that exists within trans communities. Put it on a visible shelf in your office, share it with the people you work alongside – clients and colleagues alike.

In the first chapter, authors Mira C. Jourdan and Harper B. Keenan write:

Trans people are diverse, and we will never resolve the contradictions between our many views. We can all agree, however, on certain things. Trans people are real. There are many, many ways that people conceive of their own genders. This expansiveness can be creative, and it can also be a source of frustration. Trans people should not be forced to earn recognition of who they are, nor be forced to perform a narrowly prescribed gender role to be able to stay alive, to be safe, or to access community integration, legal recognition, or medical services they need. Although we are all very different, there is strength in common advocacy. (2022, p. 7)

Kai Cheng Thom notes in the Foreword, "*Trans Bodies, Trans Selves* stands within the activist lineage that dares to recognize the rich depth and brilliance of our culture, to imagine that *trans people* are the rightful experts in our own identities, bodies, and experiences" (2022, p. xi). In a time when many people have a lot to say about transgender people (Serano, 2024), not all of which is kind, dignifying or offers any kind of acknowledging or witnessing, this is an important position to take.

Trans bodies, trans selves takes inspiration from *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, another significant project that recognises the depth and brilliance of insider knowledge and lived experience. *Our Bodies,*

Ourselves was founded in 1969 by a group of women who met during a "female liberation conference" (*Our Bodies, Ourselves*, n.d.). They shared their knowledge in order to "serve as a model for women to learn about themselves, communicate their findings with doctors, and challenge the medical establishment to change and improve the care that women receive" (*Our Bodies, Ourselves*, n.d.). They formed the Boston Women's Health Book Collective and published *Our bodies, ourselves*, which was revised and updated multiple times between 1971 and 2011.

In the Afterword for the first edition of *Trans bodies, trans selves* (Erickson-Schroth, 2014), the authors of *Our bodies, our selves* wrote:

Thanks to *Trans Bodies, Trans Selves* and all the transgender folks who have been writing and teaching over the past many years, we, a group of cisgender women, now know that we can no longer say "a woman's body" and mean only one thing. One person's body may have a penis and testicles, and be a woman's body. Another person's body may have breasts or a clitoris, and be a man's body. The revolutionary point is that we can name our gender identity for ourselves and rightfully expect respect and recognition. "Our bodies, ourselves" grows in meaning daily. (Authors of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, 2014, p. 592)

In narrative therapy, we are invited to "consider the histories, herstories and theirstories in [our] local context of the folks who transgress, fail, defy norms of gender, sex, sexualities, bodies and families, including those histories that are currently emerging" (Maeder, 2021). It is a political stance to centre the lived experience and stories of the people we are working with. Practitioners in the field of narrative practice have historically acted in alignment with this stance when it comes to gender and other areas of experience, even when these actions have been "controversial and bold at the time" (White & Cross, 2016, p. 61). When I dream of the future of narrative practice, I want practitioners to be bold in our centring of trans people as the experts in their/our own lives, regardless of controversy.

Acts of boldness like this can also be acts of celebration! In *Queer Counselling and Narrative Practice*, David Denborough wrote, "For those of us whose sexual identities flourish outside the norms of heterosexual desire, and for those who are demonstrating how gendered identities are more fluid than we were led to believe, this book is a celebration

of insider knowledge” (2002, p. vii). *Trans bodies, trans selves*, too, is a celebration of insider knowledge in similar ways.

In *Queer counselling and narrative practice*, Esben Esther Pirelli Benestad wrote:

The challenge for all health professionals, indeed all adults, could be formulated as follows: The quest is not for the possibly transgendered child or adolescent to understand or take care of the world, but for the world to understand and take care of the transgendered. (2002, p. 217)

This challenge remains relevant today. I believe this book can help narrative practitioners meet it.

The challenge that Pirelli Benestad offers to all health professionals, and all adults, resonates with a question that Arthemis Rodhanthy has offered to feminists. In a 2004 letter to Dulwich Centre’s ongoing project on “Feminism, therapy, and narrative ideas”, she wrote:

My relationship with feminism is rather complex. How is it possible for me to draw upon feminist ideas when some circles have caused damage to my kindreds ...

It is a sad reality that those who I thought would be allies in a patriarchal world have caused harm to the sub-group of women to whom I belong. It’s a sad reflection of our situation that, unless we keep quiet [about being trans], we have both the patriarchy and feminism against us.

This brings me to the question of whether it is possible to connect feminist ideas with poststructuralism. I don’t believe that there are two sexes or two genders. I think there can be many. Is it possible to connect the projects of feminism to notions of a multiplicity of genders; to gender-diversity; to multiple ways to become gendered or sexed; to freedom of gender-expression; to genderrights? My hope is that it is. (Rodhanthy, 2004, p. 2.)

Twenty years later, some branches of feminism have answered Arthemis’s question with a “no”. But there are many other branches of feminism that continue to say yes. For narrative practitioners who identify as feminists and want to say yes to Arthemis’s question, this book will offer encouragement and support.

As you make your way through this volume, you might note how language has shifted in the 22 years since *Queer Counselling and Narrative Practice* was published. In a field where words hold deep significance, *Trans bodies, trans selves* can help readers become grounded and fluent in some of the current language. As Jennifer Finney Boylan writes in the Afterword to *Trans bodies, trans selves*:

The language has been changing at a dizzying pace ...

In the Introduction to the first edition of this book, I wrote a little bit about the language that people then used to talk about their genders, and noted some of the tension in the community between some of its different wings ... I observed then that the diversity of the community is its strength, not its weakness, and that we should all be glad that there are so many ways of being us. (2022, p. 660)

Esben Ester Pirelli Benestad (2016) published a revised version of the paper above 15 years after it was first published. The revised paper reflected how understandings of words, concepts and attitudes had changed. The second edition of *Trans bodies, trans selves* has also changed significantly from the first edition, which was published in 2014. In the Introduction, the editing team writes, “*Trans Bodies, Trans Selves* is an aspirational and evolving document, and we expect it to change, perhaps radically, with each iteration” (Carmel et al., 2022, p. xvii). The book includes 23 chapters with one to five authors and over 150 additional short pieces, as well as a significant number of direct quotes from contributors to the *Trans Bodies, Trans Selves* Survey.

Trans bodies, trans selves celebrates and makes visible many of the different ways of being trans. Almost every page includes photos of trans people, text boxes with trans people’s stories in their own words, art by and about trans people. Old and young, fat and straight-sized, ambulatory and with mobility devices, from a wide range of locations and racial backgrounds, with outfits and hairstyles and jewellery and makeup that locate them across the vast galaxy of gender ... flipping through this book lifts the crushing weight of cisnormativity.

Cisgender narrative practitioners working in individual, group, family or community spaces will find value in the rich diversity of stories, told in people’s own words and often in profound and moving experience-near

language. Here is an entire book of voices with which to “people the room” (Reynolds, 2011) in conversations with T/GE folks and the people who are in relationship with them.

This is also a valuable resource for narrative practitioners who want to become more aware of some of the discourses that swirl around T/GE folks, and who want to take an informed position on these discourses in order to listen with more context in narrative conversations.

Despite this, it is important to note that:

An effort was made to select short pieces, quotes, and art that represent the diversity of trans communities. We have inevitably failed at this goal. Most of the authors live in the United States or Canada. Many are middle or upper class, and many are white. There are stories that are not told here – voices that are not heard. (Carmel et al., 2022, p. xviii)

Narrative practitioners in global majority contexts will notice these gaps (and perhaps be sparked to create collective documentation that addresses them!).

Collective narrative practitioners will recognise how this book fosters a context for readers and contributors “in which individuals who are going through hard times can make contributions to the lives of others who are going through similar difficulties” (Denborough, 2008, p. 4), how it works to locate problems in their social and political contexts, and how it is a counter document to so many impositions of expert knowledge from outside the community.

There is a significant sense of *communitas* (Denborough, 2008; V. Turner, 1969) in the book, which narrative practitioners will recognise. Narrative practitioners have been interested in ways *communitas* can evoke connection while not merging identities (Denborough, 2008): in *communitas*, “the gifts of each person are alive to the full, along with those of every other person. *Communitas* liberates individuals from conformity to general norms” (E. Turner, 2004, p. 98).

Trans bodies, trans selves is not a narrative therapy book, and narrative therapy isn’t mentioned in the chapter on mental health (perhaps future partnerships can be developed with the Trans Bodies, Trans Selves team!). Despite this, narrative practitioners can learn from, benefit from, and find resonance and political alignment with this phenomenal publication.

Inside the book, you’ll find sections addressing:

- race, ethnicity and culture
- immigration
- disability
- religion and spirituality
- sex and gender development
- coming out
- social transition
- work and employment
- legal issues
- general, sexual and reproductive health
- medical transition
- surgical transition
- mental health and emotional wellness
- intimate relationships
- sexuality
- parenting
- US history
- arts and culture
- activism, politics and organising.

Notes

¹ This is the terminology used in *Trans bodies, trans selves*.

² I use “straight-sized” rather than alternatives such as “thin” to refer to people whose body shape and size is more readily accommodated by the fashion industry and dominant, fatphobic standards. (<https://www.teenvogue.com/story/superfat-small-fat-how-they-are-used>)

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