

Like Everyone Else, Just Different

Nora Eckert

Translation: Katy Derbyshire

As we all know, God made Eve out of Adam; one rib was enough. So does trans* history start with woman being made out of man? Biologists would probably explain it the other way around and field woman as the human prototype – with man as a variant stemming from woman. The answer to the beginnings of trans* history would remain the same: It has existed as long as humans have existed, just that no one wrote it down. My story is about the woman inside a man, as one possibility in nature. All of nature is creation, and I am part of it. I'm like everyone else, just a bit different, and in the end, everyone is a case of their own.

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Looking back now at the face of the little boy I once was, I see much more: precisely six decades of an eventful and unusual life. On the one hand, that perspective creates distance, so much so that I perceive myself almost as an entirely different person, and on the other hand I seem to have a greater hold on that far-off time of childhood than I did then, since I know more now about the times and myself than in the days when the photo was taken. The boy I once was knew nothing of what was to come, and yet his secret was locked inside him from the very beginning. It was tangible, though, something that could not be named. That didn't stop the boy from feeling comfortable in his own skin. I think you can tell by looking at him. First of all, it was his skin after all, and secondly it enclosed what helped him to realize, sixteen years later: You are a woman. For most people, that's an oddity of human nature that is hard to understand: being a boy and claiming a female identity. But that little lad managed pretty well later on, as a young man – except for the stains; spillages remained very much part of my life.

I want to tell the story of how the boy became a woman, or to be precise: a trans woman. You'll understand the subtle difference later on. The tale begins with my arrival in Berlin, because my story is closely and irrevocably linked with the city. I want to tell you how I became what I am. Being trans* became a success story for me. You'll read about it in these pages. At the end, though, I want to take a look back and focus again on the place the little boy in the photo called home, in his childhood and youth. Then you might understand that we can never run away from ourselves, and neither do we have any reason to do so: *I am what I am*. That much was clear to the boy with the Mona Lisa smile posing in front of his mother's garden beans, even if he didn't yet speak a word of English.

Arriving in the Big City

'The most decadent city in Europe. We'd go to Romy Haag, there were no clubs like that anywhere else. ... It was an alternative nightlife we didn't have in London. ... The city was more run-down and disreputable than these days, not at all bourgeois.'

Bryan Ferry

Berlin was where everything began. This city has always been good for new things. Not necessarily for beginners, but for all things beginning. The city had a magical attraction and it still does today, but it has changed. There's a rather clichéd but nonetheless fitting quote that says Berlin never is, Berlin is only ever becoming. Still dishevelled by the war into the 1970s, unlike any other West German city, it really had become a symbol of survival and alternative living – in more ways than one. It's now or never, was the motto of the city and its inhabitants, including those newly arrived in West Berlin. Those more ways than one were, firstly, the survival of a hermetically sealed half of a city as an open urban space, and at the same time its inhabitants' art of survival, which consisted of everyone being able to be who they wanted to be, if they wanted. That magic was untouched by the wall around the 'autonomous political unit', as the East Germans called the western half of the city. We called it West-Berlin, with a hyphen; anywhere that hyphen was missing was the East, ideologically speaking. West Berlin's island status made it considerably more attractive, for not quite thirty years. Perhaps that helps explain why tourists are so keen to look for chunks of the Wall, as though they still encapsulated a little of the inexplicable essence of a long-vanished era.

It was a place where a pop icon like David Bowie could feel like he was on a desert island, going unrecognized and undisturbed amid a good two million people. The Berliners are famous for their gruff manners – which have always brought everything down to earth. The locals seem to have an antidote to pathos in the genes. It's near-impossible to surprise them, firstly because they've seen everything before, and secondly because they have a talent for spotting the crux of the matter. And that means they deal with everything and everyone on a scale from laid-back to don't-care. Everyone does their own thing – that's the Berlin mentality of live and let live. In the rough climate of West Berlin, a subcultural diversity flourished that was nowhere to be found in West Germany. The old couplet *You're crazy, my child, best go to Berlin where they're all that wild* had retained its kernel of truth, though its mythical transformation through the 1920s – that decade called either golden or wild – had grown tattered and the shine had come off the place. But there's certainly something to it: very special plants thrive here.

I arrived in West Berlin shortly before Christmas of 1973 – the same year as the great Swiss writer Max Frisch came for a 'Berlin experiment'. For me, it turned into an experiment still going on

to this day, one that I hope will continue for many years – a life as an open-ended long-term test. Frisch soon turned his back on West Berlin, though. Chased by fear of dwindling creativity, he moved on to New York City to enjoy life to the full, as you can read in his story *Montauk*. In my case, Berlin became my biotope of self-exploration and self-discovery, all the way to the literal reinvention of myself.

I had high expectations, of course, but in the end, reality outperformed my imagination. The unpredictable prevailed. While the city could be horribly banal and arrogant, grandiose in its ugliness, incredibly square, in the next moment, at the next corner it would transform into the exact opposite: inspired and ingenious. I'd put that down to the nature of Berlin's population, with its above-average concentration of very varied originals.

Cities are indeterminate promises. They are a conglomerate of never-ending possibilities. They are labyrinths, I once read in a book about Berlin. On my very first trip to the city, I discovered a facet of that labyrinthine nature when I turned up at the Elwert und Meurer Bookstore for a job interview. Seen from the street, it was nothing but a normal shop with two large display windows, between them the entrance, plus a separate little sales room tacked on the side for the paperback section. You couldn't tell from outside, but hundreds of employees worked there, most of them for the booming mail-order department. Behind the shop was a two-storey extension, linked by numerous staircases and corridors all the way down to the basement. That labyrinth of corridors left a lasting impression on me, like other similarly convoluted architectures, returning later in a number of my dreams – always in conjunction with something unexpected. Complexity has always drawn me in. Ever since my childhood, nothing seemed more promising than hidden places, and although I rarely remember dreams, these labyrinthine visions have stayed with me. As hidden and dark as the rooms and corridors in those dreams were, in the end they always led outside or into a sun-drenched room with a view of a garden or street.

That job interview at Elwert und Meurer came with a dual premiere: my first time in Berlin and my first time on a plane. The flight was a gift from my boss, the small publisher Günter Kämpf, head of the Anabas Verlag where I'd been working for just under two years. We flew together from Frankfurt to Berlin (he had some business to see to here as well). We almost missed the plane. We'd driven from Giessen to Frankfurt Airport and got stuck in traffic. 'Please, please let us get there on time. My future is waiting,' I prayed silently. We got there at last and ran to the gate five minutes before departure time. These days with all the security checks, it would never have worked out, but back then they just waved us through. Flashed our tickets, hand luggage unchecked. I think we didn't need to show any ID until the return flight. You just hopped on the plane and off again, just like travelling by train. What a wonderful time. We flew PanAm. Back then, the name PanAm had an air

of glamour and big wide world. While the Berlin Wall was up, only French, British and American airlines were allowed to fly across East Germany to the island of West Berlin.

We landed at Tempelhof – slap-bang in the middle of the city, the runway hemmed in by housing blocks in the boroughs of the Kreuzberg, Neukölln and Tempelhof. As the plane came in to land, the roofs along Tempelhofer Damm looked like you could reach out and touch them. You could peep into lit-up living rooms or geranium-lined balconies. Later, I took off and landed countless times from Tempelhof Airport.

When there was air turbulence at play, the planes almost shaved the tops off the surrounding roofs. After landing you emerged into the stylish arrivals hall, which I encountered out of the blue again in Philadelphia's Central Station decades later. And then the incomparable feeling of being right there in the city – not only with turbulent approaches. You stepped straight out of the lobby into Berlin, immediately on Platz der Luftbrücke, the square with Eduard Ludwig's airlift monument affectionately known as the 'hunger rake', Tempelhofer Damm to the left, Mehringdamm to the right. That very street was soon to take me to my new life, and yet was at the centre of town.

My arrival in 1970s Kreuzberg (a very different place then to now) felt like a homecoming. I wished I didn't have to leave again. Life there was always on the right emotional frequency: straightforward but still warm and sincere, gruff but never vindictive. I lived almost thirty years on Gneisenaustrasse, just a stone's throw away from Tempelhof Airport. As is the tradition for newcomers to Kreuzberg, I found a small flat in the side-wing of a tenement. The window in the bed-sitting room opened onto back walls, with the one on the left the most beautiful: four storeys of blank brick, a mosaic of whatever the rubble women rebuilding Berlin in 1945 dug up as recycled construction material, at least four or five types of brick. I loved that weathered wall the way you love a beautiful painting. These days, it's neatly plastered, covering up the work of art. The weeds wending their way through the cracks took the place of a garden. I've always admired nature's tenacity; little trees grew out of the cracks in the walls over two or three years, sometimes more, only to dry up and die at some point. Every spring, the new green leaves brought me joy. Depending on how the wind blew, I'd hear plane engines being revved up for tests on Sundays. Their roars mingled with all the sounds from the surrounding flats, amplified by the trumpet-like back yard: children's yells, pots and pans, a ringing telephone, barking dogs and the tenant from the second floor sharing his record of the aria *Casta Diva* for the umpteenth time. Maria Callas was no stranger to our back yard. But I'm getting ahead of myself – I hadn't yet found the flat.

My interview went well and I got the job. A few weeks later, I passed through the Dreilinden checkpoint and sped along the Avus motorway towards my new home town. Hilla from my flat-share in Giessen had got hold of a VW bus for us to move my meagre belongings to the city. Berlin was showing its least friendly side that winter, bitterly cold and frosty. I found my first place to stay in a

flat-share in an industrial building – was it two or three blocks deep into the complex? – on Waldemarstrasse, in the heart of Kreuzberg’s rougher half with its legendary SO36 postcode. They had rented a whole floor but the bare concrete floor didn’t make it exactly cosy. You could smell the winter in Berlin back then; smoke would swathe the narrow streets, a sooty haze trapped by certain weather conditions. It was no wonder – most homes were heated by coal stoves. It felt like walking along smoky chimneys. 1973 was the year of the oil crisis – and our Kreuzberg loft didn’t use coal, it used oil heaters. The sudden price explosion meant we had to take radical saving measures. After a sobering meeting, the collective decision was to cut off the heaters in the bedrooms and heat only the kitchen, bathroom and common room. The gigantic space I shared with a student couple I knew from Giessen had high windows running all along the outside wall, at least twenty metres long, the glass held in place by leaky metal frames. It instantly turned into a Siberian hellhole. The window was transformed into a meadow of frost flowers, though we were blind to their exotic beauty when we crawled into our frozen-stiff beds at night. Soon it was a thick layer of ice, intensifying the impression that Siberia started just east of the River Elbe.

The underground train to work gave me an opportunity to warm up. I got on the U-Bahn at Kottbusser Tor station and off again at Innsbrucker Platz, changing at Nollendorfplatz – and I discovered a whole cosmos of history and stories along the way. I soaked it all up, constantly searching for traces of the past. I learned to read the city, realized all it had lost, and gradually began to feel at home in what was left of Berlin. Back then, the U-Bahn wasn’t just a place for me to warm up; it was also a smoker’s paradise. *Gitanes* were my brand. Every train had smoking and non-smoking carriages, with and without clouds of smoke, all very fair. On the buses, the top deck with its rows of four seats (!) was also reserved for smokers, the air up there often dense enough to cut with a knife. I was amazed to begin with – but hey, it’s Berlin.

My second interim asylum was nice and warm thanks to a typical tiled stove, but first of all I had to learn the fine art of heating with coal. Exploding stoves were a rare phenomenon, but they had been known. A new friend let me use his little flat for a short while. It consisted of a kitchen and one room, with the same combination on the other side of the hallway. The two flats shared the same front door onto the stairwell. There was no bathroom; the toilet was half a flight down the stairs, used by all the tenants on that floor. Urgent business could be tricky and there was no point being fussy about hygiene. Life was pretty rustic, especially seeing as there was a knacker’s yard in one of the rear buildings. And yet the place was also home to gentle souls and fairy-like creatures; you just had to have nerves of steel.

Despite the frosty and then rustic reception, I knew Berlin was my city. It was perfectly clear, even though I hadn’t seen that much of the world at the age of not-quite-twenty: Nuremberg, provincial Giessen, a little bit of Munich, Frankfurt, Cologne, where I had once sought out one of my

artist idols – the painter and sculptor Wolf Vostell, who actually granted me an audience. I had got hold of his address somehow and simply rang his doorbell to tell him how great I thought his art was. I've never been shy and retiring. In a way, I've always had the feeling the world is out there for me, just waiting to be discovered and possessed, although it hasn't always handed everything over right away. Sooner or later, though, I've always found a doorway in.

In any case, Berlin was unlike all the other cities, there was no doubt about that. I never wanted to leave. Spring will come along soon enough, I thought, and by then I'd have a place of my own. And that's exactly what happened with the flat I've already described, which consisted mainly of one large room. There was also a kitchen with a box under the window with space for four hundredweight of coal briquettes (which was what I needed every month over an average winter). The heating here was also a tiled coal stove. The highlight was the recently installed shower. It was a genuine luxury – most small flats didn't have a bathroom. They were only installed for a wealthier class of tenant. My amenities meant I was privileged, and for a while I had a steady stream of friends popping round for a shower, bringing along towels, soap and the latest gossip.

Berlin and me – it was love at first sight. I loved the city the way you love a faded beauty queen; I felt her still glowing heart warm my own. And her wit was still sparkling too. Add to that her never-lost grandeur with all her now rather shaky gestures. Joseph Roth, certainly not one of Berlin's greatest admirers, wrote a definition of Berlin that hit the nail on the head when I read it, despite the intervening war damage and the city's division. It still rang true because the energy he describes was still smouldering, and it was even strangely current: *The city... lies outside of Germany, outside of Europe. It is the capital of itself. It is not nourished by the land. It takes nothing from the earth on which it is built. It transforms that earth into asphalt, brick and wall... It is the epitome of a city.*

You really could regard the island of West Berlin as the idea of a city that exists only for itself, cut off from almost all previous functions and significance, with inhabitants preferably living likewise, only for themselves. Everything felt unreal in some way, and yet reality was constantly catching up on you, heavy with the scents of coal dust, damp brick, soured beer from the next corner pub and old frying fat. When my mother started visiting Berlin in the late 1970s, having lived here for a few years during the war, she recognized the musty burnt smell in the train tunnels, which had become death traps during the air-raid nights of the war years. For my mother, they were horrific memories. Despite Berlin's characteristic indifference, the city is always especially overpowering when you least expect it. That strange catacomb scent has gone now.

In Berlin, from my perspective, people don't feel a drive to achieve great things; instead it's the moment that counts, the here and now and what you're holding in your hands. At times, its sense of reality can be a euphemism for indifference, but of a productive kind, because the city lets things be the way they want to be – the grubby nooks and crannies, the weeds between the paving

stones, and humankind itself in all its genius specialities. The chaotic untidiness, incidentally, is the reason why Berlin has become a city of nightingales. Berlin leaves the scrub and underbrush in place, the habitat they love. There's no beating us on that front. I find it inspiring that nightingales like living here. For a while, I would change trains every day at Halensee station. While I waited for my S-Bahn, a tiny bird with a huge voice warbled beautiful arias, a miracle of nature.

Unlike with the nightingales, Berlin doesn't give us humans anything for free, but nor does the city mind us declaring it our personal property. In fact, Berlin loves it when we do that, as I soon found out. You could read into it anything you wanted to be, I read in a text on David Bowie's Berlin years. And that's exactly how it was. Iggy Pop and the photographer Ester Friedman remember it the same way – the city as a good place for crazies and artists, and a dangerous place too. You could get lost here, be forgotten, but in your own way you could stay on the ball and achieve something meaningful in the end.

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First she worked in Romy Haag's cloakroom, then as a shorthand typist – and only came out as trans just before retiring. Nora Eckert on shocks and serenity

Interview: Deike Dienen and Susanne Kippenberger

Ms Eckert, transgender people are now allowed to work for the Berlin police force, Joe Biden has appointed a trans woman as assistant secretary for health, Rachel Levine. You yourself have been living as a trans woman in Berlin for decades. Are you a pioneer?

I am, but there have always been transgender people. We're born this way. At some point we discover that our identities don't match our physical genders. The post-war German state, though, simply considered us men in women's clothes.

As a trans woman in the seventies, you were denied a respectable profession. Nightlife was the only option.

The job centre called us impossible to place in work. It's not just putting on a dress and giving yourself a woman's name; that's just where the problems start. There were no self-help groups either, no way to talk to others. I needed practical tips, support. I found it in the little trans community at Chez Romy Haag. I called it my Factory.

You worked on the door at the legendary club and in the guest cloakroom, wore glitter and high heels and trowelled on the makeup. A pretty retrograde image of women.

That attention-seeking, emphatically feminine look – they were constrained roles we enjoyed playing because they awakened desire. You noticed whether you were being looked at or not. The stares, glances, gazes were our version of Likes.

Did you get hate too?

I can't remember one of us ever having bad experiences in the seventies. I always took the U-Bahn home from the club. In the early days, I looked pretty done up, and people could certainly still see the man underneath. But still, nobody made any comments or jokes.

You describe yourself as pragmatic.

These days, I see a lot of thin skins. I think we were more robust in those days, not constantly in offended mode. I'd like it if young people took a more confident approach to it. Not everything that's said wrong is meant badly.

What was it like in your childhood, did you feel like a boy?

I felt absolutely out of place. Boys were something I desired, but I wouldn't even think of playing football with them. I felt very close to the girls and their interests. My mother was a dressmaker and I got the leftover fabric to make dolls' clothes. I used to bake as well. She never said: Boys don't do that.

When you came out to your family at the age of 23...

...my mother instantly accepted me as a woman, her daughter. She even gave me my new name, Nora. She often visited me in Berlin and we'd tell each other all sorts, even intimate things. She had a photo of me on her bedside table, in a dress with long curly hair. But it's strange – we never talked about me bring trans.

When did you realize you are trans?

I thought I was gay, at first. I experienced West Berlin as a gay paradise, but even there I felt out of place. Yes, I desired men, but not as a man. It's almost impossible to explain, that's just how it was. For me, being trans means living with two genders. With a female identity and a no longer quite so male body.

You still have male sex organs.

I've never experienced that as a contradiction. Some people feel a burning need to change their bodies through gender confirmation surgery.

In your just-published memoir, you write that surgery has become a dogma, and also a lucrative business. Do a lot of trans people have the feeling of being trapped in the wrong body as children?

I know there are people who can't cope with their physicality. And then there are just as many who feel it's key to stay physically intact. Aside from that, I know how and where lust comes about in my body! Sure, the surgeon's art has made a lot of progress, but we're promised all sorts of things when it comes to nerves and sensitivity. That was always out of the question for me. I knew even during puberty: You can be a girl without looking like one.

When you meet someone, at what point do you clear up 'the genitalia issue' as you call it? Or do you like to surprise people?

In my younger days when I was very sexually active, a look was usually enough. When things got serious I'd ask: Do you know who I am? I had this formative experience...

...when a young man got such a shock he ran out of your flat.

That was right at the beginning. After that, no one ever backtracked on me. Human beings are open, in principle; nature gives us the ability to be bisexual. I've met a lot of caring family

fathers. Sure, they didn't turn their backs on their lives. But they needed the adventure as well.

Do you feel society used to be freer than it is today? These days, the main focus is on fears.
Even though diversity is omnipresent in the media, the problems actually seem to be bigger. The seventies, my heyday, seemed more innocent to me. There was a lot of curiosity. These shitstorms, all the hate – I never experienced anything like that back then.

Where did you get your confidence?

We knew we wanted to live trans lives, it was just that we had to conquer that space first. Nothing was regulated. Everything is regimented these days, you can't do anything without a therapy plan. There's also an entitled way of thinking that we could never have had. We could get everything we wanted, but we had to take care of it ourselves. Hormones, for example.

They seem to have been amazingly easy to get hold of, perhaps dangerously so.

I found my supplier at Chez Romy Haag, a doctor. One day I asked him: Listen, you can write me a prescription for hormones, can't you? – Yes of course, what do you need?

Did you inject yourself?

There was always a helping hand around. The compound was called Progynon. The patient information leaflet said it was for 'inoperable prostate carcinoma'. So we were immune to that.

What interested you was the side effects.

Something other people think is unpleasant was exactly what we wanted: breast growth. I'd hoped my first injection would flip a switch in my brain. But that didn't happen. My breasts grew gradually, like in puberty.

After the wild nightlife period, you made a surprising choice of a traditional woman's job for the next 35 years: shorthand typist.

I wanted to do something typically female, and I enjoyed office work. I worked at Ikon, an industrial company, sitting there with my shorthand pad like in a movie. It was fun! At that time, I cut the cord to the trans community; it didn't interest me any more. No one at the office knew my story – I just wanted to be the woman I lived as.

But you're a trans woman.

That's what I say now, yes. I was a passing trans woman, permanently worried I'd be outed. I had formative experiences with the company, banal things: someone asked me for a tampon! I felt caught out. It's only now I realize that the anonymity I lived in was really a way of hiding.

First you won the freedom to live the way you feel – and then you made sacrifices for such a conservative woman's role?

Well, it wasn't all that conservative. I was very independent. The office job paid all my bills and left me enough free time for a second life. I'd leave work and switch over, went to the opera, the theatre, wrote reviews and books.

Had you decided to take the job as a woman so you had your peace?

Back in 1984, I couldn't know how my colleagues would react to my trans femininity. Only the personnel manager knew, and her reaction was pretty cool. I didn't want to walk around the office with an 'exotic' stamp on my forehead.

And then you did come out, on your last day at work.

Retirement is a cut-off point, and I thought: What comes next? I also started digging around in my past. Reading old letters was tough. I thought: What have you missed out on in life? Because I'd done nothing but work for 35 years, focused on success, my whole emotional, intimate life had practically disappeared. So I decided to create some clarity for myself. It was such fun to imagine coming out at my leaving party. I dropped mysterious hints: You're all going to get a nice big surprise, I'm going to tell you the whole truth about myself.

What was the reaction like?

At the end of my little speech, I said I'd been active in the organization TransInterQueer since the beginning of the year – and I'm a trans woman myself. There was a huge round of applause and cheers, everyone came up to me to give me a hug. It was really touching, a great feeling!

Had you expected that?

A little bit. I swear by my beloved Berliners, they're just great. My relationship to Berlin is the only long-term love in my life.

You didn't want to call yourself transgender at first. Why was that?

It sounded to me like a sickness. We used to call ourselves *Fummeltanten* – drag aunties. There was widespread aversion to the label because it was the technical term used by psychiatrists and assessors. We had our lives, we didn't need any theory, and certainly not one that presented us as mentally ill and disturbed. The expression was linked to pathologizing at the time.

There's a lot of conversation going on in Germany right now about gendered and non-gendered language. Using asterisks in plurals referring to groups of people, for instance...

I like using the asterisk, as a placeholder for everything between male and female. I still use terms with masculine roots in general language, like *jemand* (someone) and *man* (one, you) because that's more practical.

A lot of people consider the language discussion a pseudo-debate, changing terminology, not structures.

My friend the writer Jérôme Robinet, a trans man, gave us this wonderful sentence: We don't want a piece of the cake, we want a new recipe. We need a culture that can think further than just two genders.

Since 2018, the WHO no longer categorizes transgenderism as a mental illness.

That's not yet official, it has to be recognized by all the states first. Of course, it shows there's an effort to depathologize it. But the term that's used now, 'gender incongruence', is also a misconstruction. It's only incongruent from a binary-normative perspective – I myself regard and experience it as congruence. The key factor for our lives, identity, has nothing to

do with our genitalia. The American biologist Milton Diamond says the central human sex organ is between our ears, not our legs. There's something magic about that sentence, for me.

Germany has its Transsexual Law, which many people consider a violation of human rights. It's a scandal that law is still on the books. The assessment process, above all, is a terrible thing. You go to court, apply to change your name and status, and then you need two psychological assessments diagnosing you as 'trans'. They practically have to confirm we have an identity disorder.

You went for assessments yourself in the early days.

I call it scientific stalking: You had to tell them about your sexual practices and fantasies, tell them what they wanted to hear from us. I used to think we could reform the law. Now I'm in favour of scrapping it entirely and regulating all the legal issues via existing laws.

The Harry Potter author J.K. Rowling thinks only born women are real women.

The majority of society isn't capable of seeing identity decoupled from genitalia. Before the coronavirus, I took part in an event about gender diversity at a school in Berlin-Reinickendorf. Only girls came along. I said to them: There are men with vaginas and women with penises. You should have heard them giggle! They can't even imagine the idea. But the reality exists. That's why I want to go public. Even though it's a Sisyphean task. That stone needs to stay put at the top now!