

Rachel Mesch, *Before Trans: Three Gender Stories from Nineteenth-Century France*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020. 360 pp. \$30.00 U.S. (cl). 9781503606739. \$30 U.S. (eb). 9781503612358.

Response by Rachel Mesch, Yeshiva University

Before Trans was published in the midst of early lockdown, in the Spring of 2020. While this unfortunate timing meant that numerous long-planned book talks were canceled, in other ways the pandemic expanded my ability to connect with readers. Over a year of Zooms, I was lucky enough to discuss the book with numerous audiences—undergraduate and graduate, scholarly and mainstream, American, British, and French. The discussions that ensued allowed me to develop my thinking further to such an extent that I often wished I could have one more round of edits for the book. I am especially grateful, then, for this forum, which allows me to clarify my ideas as I respond to the thoughtful comments of the four incredibly generous reviewers featured here.

I will start with my choice to use feminine pronouns to tell the stories of Jane Dieulafoy, Rachilde and Marc de Montifaud, for this decision gets to one of the central questions at the heart of my book: how to use modern language to articulate an experience from the past that did not have such language available. As I will explain, my answer has changed in the two years since *Before Trans* went to press, as you will note in my use of they/them pronouns in this essay.

Linguistic conundrums were central to the query that launched the book: how did gender non-conforming figures in the nineteenth century understand themselves, before modern discourses of gender existed? What stories did they tell to render their experiences into language? From the beginning, my project was about restoring individual lives from the nineteenth century on their own terms, driven by my sense that certain modern scholarly frameworks had obscured the nature of these figures' struggles. At the time of my writing, I believed that using different pronouns for my subjects than the feminine ones to which they regularly (but not always) defaulted meant that I would have to imagine which pronouns would be most fitting; I had worked hard to not assign modern terms to their identities and sincerely felt I could not make such a personal choice on their behalf (*Before Trans*, 25). As Anna Kłosowska writes, my book shows how “language shoehorns these people’s experience into terms that are inadequate” and Andrew Israel Ross notes my purposeful refusal to “pin down the exact identities of [my] subjects” in order “to show how the gender binary, confined, confused, and confounded them even as they made and expressed their own identities.” My narration through feminine pronouns was meant to highlight this confusion.

Rachilde experimented with different pronouns in their writing but ended up reverting to the feminine later in life; Montifaud’s friends addressed them in both feminine and masculine forms. In the end, I followed Leslie Feinberg’s use of she/her in certain settings “so as not to resolve the contradiction between my birth sex and gender expression and render my transgender expression invisible” (*Before Trans*, 24). The feminine pronouns allowed to me to “preserve the historical

nature of their lived experience” (*Before Trans*, 24). I wished to hold onto a sense of disjunction as well, in order to render the tensions of their lives more apparent to my readers.

But, as Klosowka notes, “every book on trans studies was already dated before it was page-set.” Since the time of my writing, historians have settled on the pronouns they/them to designate precisely this kind of gender ambiguity in a historical context, led by Jen Manion, whose important book *Female Husbands* preceded my publication by two months.[1] This pronoun choice is not a suggestion of what an individual would have chosen, but rather, a way for historians to acknowledge what we do not know about the gender of an individual from the past. I have embraced this shift in my more recent publications (and in this essay), including a forthcoming article on trans methodologies, where I also discuss linguistic malleability as a starting axiom of working in the field.[2] In the essay, I write: “Thinking with trans means acknowledging that the language to designate gender is unstable, anachronistic, and will continue to evolve.”[3]

I wonder now if the feminine pronouns might have misled certain readers by implicitly affirming my subjects’ femininity as a baseline identity. Perhaps because of this, a few have misread my book as one about *women* exploring their gender, as in Dorothy Kelly’s description of *Before Trans* as the biographies of “three French women writers who dressed as men,” a characterization with which I take issue.[4] It is true that people at the time saw all three of my subjects as women, and that as well-known figures, they rarely attempted to pass otherwise. But those facts do not negate their overriding senses of self. As I note in my introduction, “There is no historical term for masculine-identifying women who might not have identified as women had they lived in our day but who faced their lives as women, often in tension with the patriarchal constraints placed upon them. The trans framework helps us recognize these figures” (22). Throughout the book, I avoided referring to my subjects as women because I wanted readers to think of them “as individuals pushing against that very identity, for whom the appropriate gender designation remains an open question” (11). At the same time, I do not label these figures as trans or assign any specific terminology to their identities. The modern term is meant as a lens that brings their gender questioning into focus as a central aspect of their identities, without circumscribing it.

Strikingly, Kelly does not use the word trans in her review at all, a fact which alters the stakes of the work of the book. While these three writers did offer different reasons for wearing pants, as Kelly notes, their shared reason is stated on page 8 of my introduction: “wearing men’s clothing was one of the ways in which they expressed their incompatibility with the gender assigned to them at birth.” While they may have alluded to comfort or ease in order to explain their choices, those were not the driving impulses behind gender expressions that were cultivated over years, in ways that defied all social norms. They were not united so much in their “rejection of what ‘femininity’ was at the time” (Kelly) but rather in their deep, emotional connection with masculinity. While they were often bound by patriarchal constraints, it was not the patriarchy that they were rejecting, but rather the gender binary. By deliberately deploying the modern trans framework, I ask readers to consider gender as a primary aspect of identity and to recognize the stakes of this different emphasis, which is often obscured by the overlapping fields of women’s history and feminism.

The other reviewers recognized this distinction between gender identity and feminism. As Ross writes, “Mesch locates the significance of their ability to take on supposedly male social roles – living public lives, participating in military adventures, or dressing in male clothing, for example – not in an implicit feminist rebellion against patriarchy and political exclusion, but rather in their ability to showcase the constructed nature of gender before there was even language with which to do so.” Kłosowska notes, “Explicitly not feminists, and in some cases or at some periods in their life not women, or men, each of the three protagonists is a different gender creative and trans ancestor.” Indeed, that’s the central claim of my book; without it, or without mentioning the trans lens, we fail to move beyond nineteenth-century terms for describing these figures, who were already seen in their time as rebellious “women” who rejected traditional notions of femininity. We also fail to move behind previous scholarly frameworks that fail to acknowledge gender variance as a category separate from, even if sometimes overlapping with, feminism. My goal, as Kłosowska notes, was to bring feminist and trans approaches together for a trans-feminist history that recovers the “hidden dimensions within earlier acts of resistance” (*Before Trans*, 286).

I would like to reflect in particular on Kelly’s word choice: her characterization of my book as exploring the “performance of identity” as a study of “women who contested the very definition of what it means to be a woman” evokes important feminist historical and literary scholarship from the past three decades. Influential scholars like Mary Louise Roberts and Jo Burr Margadant in the field of history, and Melanie Hawthorne, Janet Beizer, and Lisa Downing in French literary studies have focused on Judith Butler’s notions of gender as performance and Michel Foucault’s ideas of selfhood as being inseparable from the discourses that produce it.[5] My own previous work on Rachilde was similarly situated within these frameworks, and I owe a deep intellectual debt to each of these scholars.[6] But in my biographical work for *Before Trans*, I found that discourse-oriented readings of writers assigned female often failed to see their full humanity or glossed over the specificity of their experience, whether as women or gender creative individuals. Even readings that characterize writers’ own defiant articulations as “counter-discourses” too often end up being dictated by the heteronormative, and often pathologizing, terms of the dominant discourses.

What’s more, as I note in my introduction to *Before Trans*, the scholarship around Dieulafoy, Rachilde, and Montifaud could be described “as the result of a certain confirmation bias: the inherent assumption that every enigmatic aspect of their writing or life stories can be explained by the fact of their being [assumed] female. Through this limited prism, every subversive act translates as ‘a kind of early feminism’” (22). Historically, any departure from conventional feminine behavior by my subjects— what Kelly refers to as “contesting” of norms—has been seen as a feminist counter-discourse. *Before Trans* aims to get past that frame of analysis to recover a fuller range of human experience, one which recognizes gender creativity *on its own terms* and allows individuals to speak for themselves, rather than simply through or against dominant discourses. Traditionally, for example, we have read Rachilde to understand how the discourse of hysteria operated as a site of gendered power, and missed how Rachilde, as a unique individual, was grappling with the medical discourse of hysteria to try to understand their own sense of gender misalignment (Chapter 9).

Before Trans thus attempts to understand individuals who did not fit into available discourses without relying on those discourses to read them—validating instead a “felt sense of gender” and the ways in which people made their selves legible through their writings and photography.[6] This desire to see through my subjects’ eyes is the reason that I don’t consider Rachilde a feminist, as Chaplin mentions in her review, and not because someone who is not a woman cannot be a feminist. Rachilde was profoundly irritated that feminists wanted to claim them; that irritation stemmed from Rachilde *not* identifying as a woman. Acknowledging Rachilde’s sentiments helps us to understand that Rachilde’s notorious rejection of feminism emerged from something deeply personal about whom they knew themselves to be, and not from their views on the political issues of the day. That said, I agree with Ross that there is work to be done to recover trans identities “that got left behind” and that we would do well to consider these writers’ theories and articulations when updating the history of modern gender identities. That was not the work of this book, though, which was meant to center individual lives over the discursive forces that acted upon them and that either obscured their gender creativity or pathologized it.

Chaplin questions why I have emphasized queer gender over queer sexuality. There is already a long bibliography for the history of queer sexuality, while, historically, the field of queer studies has overlooked gender—by which I mean challenges to the gender binary, modes of gender expression, attention to the material body, and a felt sense of gender—as a primary site of identity.[7] I do not deny the sexual queerness of my subjects, however; my point is that these inclinations were deeply entangled in their gender nonconformity, and I offer a historical framework—absent until now—for acknowledging that nonconformity as fundamental to an individual’s self-understanding.[8] I agree with Chaplin that one can be both lesbian and trans, of course. Extensive terminology for lesbian identities existed in late nineteenth-century France [9]; but these terms were often invoked to describe gender nonconformity as well. Just as I avoid naming the precise nature of my subjects’ gender nonconformity, I avoid naming their affinities as gay or lesbian—again, to allow them to speak on their own terms, and to avoid placing them in categories that implicitly reinforce the gender assigned to them at birth. At the same time, I hope that readers can recognize the place of all three figures in both queer and trans history, and I hope that scholars will continue to explore their lives and romantic entanglements, building on this work and complicating it, using the tools of feminist, queer, and trans studies to create a more complete picture.

Finally, both Ross and Kłosowska point to the troubling nature of orientalism as an important thread in Jane Dieulafoy’s story. It’s true that there has been a temptation to celebrate Dieulafoy’s success in an exclusively male arena, without sufficiently problematizing the arena itself. I will admit that it was challenging to try to see Dieulafoy on their own terms while also giving a full picture to the power differential that they exploited, but I have centered that complexity since publication. My recent article in *Yale French Studies* “The Legs of the Orientalist” explores how Dieulafoy used one of the key creative tools of the orientalist—the camera—to construct themselves as a French imperialist, deliberately seizing the power differential affiliated with that position to their advantage. My ongoing work on the gender creativity of Pierre Loti, a friend of Dieulafoy and a fellow traveler, suggests that such exploitations of the so-called Orient as a screen for gender and sexual identity were widespread. As Said taught us long ago, these studies of the East were much more about the West. My current research explores the ways that these writers built on problematic existing power structures to create a common yet

hidden language about their own queer and gender creative selves. This is one way in which future research can demonstrate how “trans history has much to tell us about the history of France” (Ross).

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Notes

[1] Jen Manion, *Female Husbands: A Trans History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

[2] Jules Gill-Peterson writes of her own work: “it is likely that the categorical landscape will continue to change in the future, at some point rendering the language of this book anachronistic, something that I embrace.” *Histories of the Transgender Child* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018) 9.

[3] Rachel Mesch, “Trans Rachilde: A Roadmap for Recovering the Gender Creative Past and Rehumanizing the Nineteenth Century” *Dix-Neuf*, “Dispatches from the Field.” (Vol 25: 3&4, 2021).

[4] Similar language can be found in *Washington Independent Review of Books*, for example, which describes *Before Trans* as “a fascinating analysis of identity, women’s rights, and literature as a transformative tool.” Mariko Hewer, “*Before Trans*,” *Washington Independent Review of Books*, July 11, 2021.

[5] I develop this critique of feminist scholarship further in the forthcoming essay “Trans Rachilde.” See Mary Louise Roberts, *Disruptive Acts: The New Woman in Nineteenth-Century France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Jo Burr Margadant, *The New Biography: Performing Femininity in Nineteenth-Century France*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Melanie Hawthorne, *Rachilde and French Women’s Authorship* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001); Lisa Downing, “Notes on a Proto-Queer Rachilde: Decadence, Deviance and (Reverse) Discourse in *La Marquise de Sade*.” *Sexualities* 15: 16-27. 2011; Janet Beizer, *Ventriloquized Bodies: Narratives of Hysteria in Nineteenth-Century France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994).

[6] Rachel Mesch, *The Hysteric’s Revenge. French Women Writers at the Fin de Siècle*. (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2006).

[7] Gayle Salamon, *Assuming a Body. Transgender and the Rhetoric of Materiality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

[8] Chaplin asks why I “reject arguments advanced by others that Dieulafoy might have desired women,” a question I address directly in the book but will repeat here. This suggestion is based on one episode in Dieulafoy’s travelogues, and in particular a titillating sketch of a woman named Ziba Khanoum in the harem. I will take this opportunity to apologize for misspelling her name as Zika in the book, and to note that further research supports my hunch that the image was not based on a photograph at all, but rather fabricated to please a male readership. What were not fabricated, on the other hand, were the dozens of images of eroticized male bodies, several of which I shared in Chapter 3. See Mesch, “The Legs of the Orientalist,” *Yale French Studies* 139: *Photography and the Body in Nineteenth-Century France*. United Kingdom: Yale University Press, (2021): 171-188).

[9] On the roots of Queer Studies’ emphasis on sexuality, see Judith Butler, “On Proper Objects. Introduction.” *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 6.2 +3 (1994): 1-26. On the exclusion of trans studies from queer studies, see Keegan, Càel. 2018. “Getting Disciplined: What’s Trans* About Queer Studies Now?” *Journal of Homosexuality*. (67:3) 384-397.

[10] Gretchen Schultz, *Sapphic Fathers: Discourses of Same-Sex Desire from Nineteenth-Century France*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014).