

ALWAYS ANASTACIA: A TRANSGENDER LIFE IN SOUTH AFRICA

Anastacia Tomson

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TRANSGENDER NARRATIVES: THE CONTEXT AND INTERSECTIONALITY OF IDENTITY

“[M]emoir is the preferred genre of transsexual¹ literature,” writes Susan Faludi² in her biography of her transgender father. The narrative, the memoir is always present, as it is necessitated by the stories we have to tell others, particularly the medical fraternity, in order to prove and justify who we are in order to begin the medical process of becoming who we are.

Apart from a diagnostic checklist almost 100 years old compiled by Magnus Hirschfield, which still forms the framework for the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, the only agency we as transgender people have in our own becoming is our narrative. Jay Prosser, a literature professor and transgender man, writes in *Second Skins*: “transsexuality does not symptomize itself in the subject’s body, at least not visibly or reliably so. The diagnosis required for this transformation must derive from the patient’s narrative: narrativization as a transsexual necessarily precedes one’s diagnosis as a transsexual; autobiography is transsexuality’s proffered symptom” (quoted by Faludi).

1 Faludi uses the term “transsexual” almost all the way through her book. While it is the clinical, diagnostic term, “transgender” is the term used by the trans community.

2 Susan Faludi. *In the Darkroom*. 2016. New York: Metropolitan Books.

Anastacia Tomson's autobiography, *Always Anastacia: A Transgender Life in South Africa*, takes its place on the bookshelves of history as part of a long line of memoirs, which began with the now famous "The Danish Girl", Lili Elbe's memoir, *Man Into Woman*, published in 1933.

What makes Tomson's memoir stand out is that it is the first transgender memoir to come out of Africa. And as such, the subtitle, *A Transgender Life in South Africa*, takes on more significance than Tomson's story, *Always Anastacia*.

In her search for understanding her father's transition, Faludi preoccupies herself with identity and the politics of identity. She questions the trend in transgender memoirs of embracing a new self while completely eschewing and burying their previous selves. The narratives take the formulaic "before and after" structure, with a complete schism between the two people. For Faludi, understanding her father's "new" identity necessitates an excavation of who she was—a son, a husband, a father, a veteran of World War II, a Hungarian, and a Jew. For Faludi, the context of her father's identity is inextricable from who she has become.

The modern term of "intersectionality" within identity politics has this same emphasis: we are more than one aspect of ourselves. We are not just female. We are friends, daughters, wives or girlfriends, but also white or black, financially privileged or underprivileged, gay or straight, transgender or cisgender. And it is these intersecting identities that make us who we are.

It is this context, this intersectionality that I find lacking in Tomson's memoir, particularly when framing the book from the "transgender life in South Africa" point of view. The context of Tomson's story within South Africa, and Africa as a whole is alarmingly lacking.

Writing about the impetus behind the book, Tomson says: "I wanted to live the life that I felt I deserved, in peace ... I was not ashamed of being trans, and I did not want to have to live in fear of my 'secret' being discovered someday. I knew there would be a price—that to make some kind of difference to those who faced struggles similar to mine, I'd have to lay bare the intimate details of my life. But I knew, also, that doing so would bring me freedom. My dark 'secret' could hold no power over me if it wasn't a secret at all." The freedom she speaks of is something that most African trans people cannot even conceptualise, never-mind pursue. The secret that could be discovered is a secret whose discovery would threaten the lives of those who do not have her privilege.

The first few chapters deal with coming out on social media, voice coaching, lazer hair removal, access to psychiatry and therapy, trans-competent prescribing of HRT and a listing of the variety of surgical options available to her. The first brief mention of privilege occurs 58 pages into the 200-page book, and the chapter entitled "Privilege" is two pages long.

In a country where the majority of transgender people are unable to even come out as transgender without fearing for their lives, Tomson's relating of stories of support

group meetings, her ability to come out publicly on social media and the myriad of treatments and gender-affirming services available to her, create a dissonance. While she provides context for her own dissonance between her identity as a trans woman and her Jewish faith, the dissonance she only touches upon between her reality and the rest of her community is jarring.

This is problematic in a country and a continent where over 95% of transgender and gender non-conforming people are people of colour, and over 80% of these are from previously disadvantaged groups. As the first transgender memoir in Africa, Tomson's narrative is experienced by a tiny minority. And without discussing privilege more fully, the book skews the lived realities and experiences of transgender people in Africa, not only for its trans and cisgender readers, leaving the former with a despondency-creating narrative diametrically opposed to theirs; and leaving the latter with a false sense of the need for society to transform itself in step with the transformation of its transgender citizens, and leaving the latter. Without denying or belittling Tomson's experience and the difficulties that she faced in coming out and continues to face in relation to dysphoria and integrating her identity into society, the difficulties faced by the trans community at large in the country she lives in are a matter of life and death. Leaving the reader unaware of this context creates a false narrative of what it is to have a transgender life in South Africa.

There is no question that Tomson's book is essential; that it has empowered trans women, transgender and gender non-conforming people in general to begin using their voices, to begin narrating who they are. It has freed many from the idea that there is something wrong with them, that they are alone, that there is no hope. It has also begun the necessary education of cisgender people about transgender issues, by framing those issues in personal, not academic or American terms. This book has changed, and will continue to change lives. Of this there is no doubt. And it is, after all, a memoir, not an academic text or a piece of research into the lived reality of the trans community in Africa or South Africa. This is her story, her lived reality, and as such she has the freedom to tell it in whichever way she wants. But as the first transgender memoir in Africa, to tell her story without contextualising it to a greater degree does a disservice to one of the driving factors behind the book: to educate.

"I entrust my secrets to you. All I ask for in return is your compassion," says Tomson in closing off the preface. In the context of the greater trans community, we need to ask for more than just compassion. We need action, as the human rights abuses perpetrated in the shadow of the protection of our constitution need to be addressed and redressed before all trans people can entrust their secrets to anyone; before they can live their lives to any degree of freedom.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Germaine de Larch is a non-binary trans person living in South Africa. As an activist for transgender rights they have spoken at national and international conferences on the topics of non-binary trans identity, masculinity, gender-based violence and the importance of transgender visibility.