

Research Bank

Journal article

Searching for trans possibilities in Australia, 1910–39

Riseman, Noah

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Journal of Australian Studies on 2020, available online:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/https://doi.org/10.1080/14443058.2020.1712614>

Searching for Trans Possibilities in Australia, 1910–39

Noah Riseman—author please insert department, institution, city, and email address

Abstract:

This article uses Australian newspapers from 1910 to 1939 to pose some preliminary ideas about imagining trans possibilities before the Second World War. Using trans-ing analysis and drawing on ideas of trans-historicity, the article focuses on the ways that the Australian press represented males caught dressing as women, and the ways that those individuals explained their gender performances. Although the accused usually argued that they were only joking, reading against the grain suggests that the frequency and nature of these gender transgressions represented challenges to the established gender binaries of the era. Historians need to read such examples of gender non-normativity as part of an Australian trans-historicity for which shifting psychological, medical and social discourses would only gradually provide a language to articulate more diverse gender identities.

Keywords: transgender, newspapers, trans-historicity, gender, cross-dressing

On 5 December 1925, a short article entitled “Masqueraded as Woman” appeared in Melbourne’s *Argus* newspaper. The 15 lines described an incident when two police constables spotted a suspicious person in women’s clothing at St Kilda Beach. The police arrested John Watson, alias William Hopeley, and charged him with behaving in an offensive manner and being idle and disorderly.¹ A longer article in Perth’s *Truth* newspaper indicated that Watson’s wife was away on holiday and that “to brighten things up, he dressed himself in some of his wife’s clothes. A gingham dress, silk stockings, high-heeled shoes, short coat, a hat and veil comprised his attire for the novel”.² It was common practice for police to charge cross-dressers under the provisions of state vagrancy laws in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.³ In this instance, the magistrate dismissed the charges against Watson/Hopeley, accepting the defence claim that there was no law policing men’s dress.

¹ “Masqueraded as Woman,” *Argus* (Melbourne), 5 December 1925, 38.

² “Watson Wasn’t a Woman, But He Dressed As One,” *Truth* (Perth), 2 January 1926, 5.

³ Susanne Davies, “Sexuality, Performance, and Spectatorship in Law: The Case of Gordon Lawrence, Melbourne, 1888,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 7, no. 3 (1997): 396.

Cross-dressing cases regularly appeared in the Australian press from the 1880s until the Second World War. Various newspapers published these stories, from the small rural weeklies through to the large city dailies. The frequency of articles about cross-dressers suggests that editors were making conscious decisions to include these stories. Lucy Chesser's book *Parting with my Sex* is the most comprehensive source on press coverage of cross-dressing in 1870s–1920s Australia. Chesser argues that newspapers, as cultural arbiters of social norms, would often use sensational headlines and text to expose these public contraventions of gender normativity.⁴ Marjorie Garber argues that gender transgressions have historically been so “terrifying and seductive” to the public because they challenge the very binaries through which society has defined people. Gender diversity exposes what Garber calls a category crisis: “a failure of definitional distinction, a borderline that becomes permeable, that permits the border crossings from one (apparently distinct) category to another”.⁵ Therefore, by publishing examples of (trans)gender transgressions, newspapers were reinforcing/policing gender constructs and the bounds of appropriate gender behaviour. Indeed, Chesser argues that Australian coverage of cross-dressing reflected contemporaneous anxieties around sex and sexuality.⁶

Historians have been hesitant to question individual gender identities. To take the opening case from this article as an example, why did Watson/Hopeley dress in women's clothing and venture to such a public place? Is it possible that Watson/Hopeley saw their gender identity as being female or non-binary—what in 21st-century parlance we would call trans or gender diverse? Or is it possible that Watson/Hopeley conceived of their gender identity in another way that we do not have terminology to describe? Kadji Amin argues that “instead of disavowing historicity by reading the categories of the present as the ‘truth’ of the

⁴ Lucy Chesser, *Parting with my Sex: Cross-Dressing, Inversion and Sexuality in Australian Cultural Life* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2008), xv–xvii.

⁵ Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing & Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 16.

⁶ Chesser, *Parting with my Sex*, 318.

past or by phobically concluding that any attachment to history, fashion or subculture is proof of inauthenticity, we must attend to the spaces, socialities, and times haunted by transgender ghosts”.⁷ Posing the above questions and examining cross-dressing cases thus opens new possibilities to reconceptualise the history of gender identity and imagine “transgender ghosts” in early 20th-century Australia.

This article examines cases of men caught in women’s clothes in Australia from 1910 until the Second World War to discuss gender diversity before the advent of the term “transgender”. The year 1910 is significant because that is when Magnus Hirschfeld published *Transvestites: The Erotic Drive to Cross Dress*, for the first time distinguishing cross-dressing (or transvestitism as he called it) from homosexuality.⁸ The book did not initially receive significant attention or dissemination in Australia. Although Australian doctors and psychologists were aware of British and continental sexology, the discipline was on the margins of the medical profession. It would not be until the 1920s that sexologist Norman Haire established a practice in Sydney. Haire was familiar with Hirschfeld and other sexologists’ work, and he pushed for their field to be respected in Australia.⁹ Therefore, the period from the 1910s to the 1930s reveals shifts in public discourse, as new ideas about sexuality and gender identity gradually infiltrated the Australian medical and psychology professions and media. This article applies new scholarship on transhistoricity to imagine trans possibilities in early 20th-century Australia. The article also shows how transing analysis can shift our interpretations of cases traditionally seen through the lens of sexuality, instead constructing an Australian transhistoricity.

⁷ Kadji Amin, “Ghosting Transgender Historicity in Colette’s *The Pure and the Impure*,” *L’Esprit Créateur* 53, no. 1 (2013): 128.

⁸ Magnus Hirschfeld, *Transvestites: The Erotic Drive to Cross Dress*, trans. Michael A. Lombardi-Nash (New York: Prometheus Books, [1910] 1991).

⁹ Frank Bongiorno, *The Sex Lives of Australians: A History* (Collingwood, Vic: Black Inc., 2012), 118–20, 67.

The Problem of Historicising Trans Identities

Newspaper articles are the main window historians have to explore trans possibilities in pre–Second World War Australia. Chesser conducted her research by painstakingly browsing newspapers on microfilm. Since her book’s publication, the National Library of Australia’s Trove digitised newspaper archive has revolutionised the ability of Australian historians to access such primary sources. The search terms “transgender”, “transvestite”, “man-woman”, “woman-man”, or “cross-dresser” produce over 1,000 newspaper articles from this epoch. Coverage of cross-dressing remained relatively steady across the 20-year period examined in this article. Many of the articles were reprints from larger newspapers, revealing the wide dissemination of cross-dressing stories across Australia. Some articles were only a few lines long, merely noting the arrest and/or conviction of someone for cross-dressing; others provide details about the person’s life, arrest, appearance, and occasionally quotes from their court appearances. In most instances, the reader can only speculate as to why these people dressed up and performed a gender role other than their sex assigned at birth.¹⁰ The examples in this article derive from the few examples of longer newspaper articles that presented more information about the case and therefore leave more scope to question the role that gender identity played in the person’s dress.

Chesser and other historians who have examined examples of cross-dressing in pre–Second World War Australia have focused on press portrayals and public reactions. In cases of females assuming male identities, some media coverage empathised with females seeking to improve their economic situations by living and working as men. Other reports expressed anxieties about cross-dressing women’s sexuality, especially when the individual was

¹⁰ On performing gender, see Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 3rd ed. (New York and London: Routledge, 2007).

married.¹¹ Males caught dressing in female clothing usually received little sympathy from the press. British sexology discourses from the 1880s to the 1920s linked these cross-dressing cases to ideas of inversion and homosexuality, rather than to gender identity.¹²

Michel Foucault famously argued that social discourses have constantly (re)created sexual identities. Discourses, such as those about homosexuality, may define identities and ways for people to articulate their sense of self. At the same time, such discourses are a means of power and social control. That is, in the illusion of empowering people through the proliferation of social discourses, people are in actuality contained and defined to exist within those discourses in ways which they had not been before.¹³ This is most certainly the case for transgender people, for whom the medical profession first coined the categories “transvestite”, “transsexual”, “gender identity disorder” and “gender dysphoric”. After the Second World War, psychiatrists had the power to define, include or exclude and assist or disempower gender non-conforming individuals. Transgender activists have challenged this pathologisation of “transgender” since at least the 1990s, forcing medical professionals to reconsider the ways they classify and interact with trans and gender-diverse people.¹⁴

The first known reference to “transgender” people was in 1965, though the word did not come into popular usage until the 1990s. The term “transgender” originally referred to

¹¹ Mimi Colligan, “The Mysterious Edward/Ellen De Lacy Evans: The Picaresque in Real Life,” *La Trobe Journal* 69 (2002): 59–68; Ruth Ford, “‘Prove First You’re a Male’: A Farmhand’s Claim for Wages in 1929 Australia,” *Labour History*, no. 90 (2006): 1–21; “Sexuality and ‘Madness’: Regulating Women’s Gender ‘Deviance’ through the Asylum, the Orange Asylum in the 1930s,” in *“Madness” in Australia: Histories, Heritage and the Asylum*, ed. Catharine Coleborne and Dolly MacKinnon (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press in association with the API Network and Curtin University of Technology, 2003), 109–19; “‘The Man-Woman Murderer’: Sex Fraud, Sexual Inversion and the Unmentionable ‘Article’ in 1920s Australia,” *Gender and History* 12, no. 1 (2000): 158–96; Gail Reekie, “‘She Was a Lovable Man’: Marion/Bill Edwards and the Feminisation of Australian Culture,” *Journal of Australian Lesbian Feminist Studies*, no. 4 (1994): 43–50; Lucy Chesser, “Transgender-Approximate, Lesbian-Like, and Genderqueer: Writing about Edward De Lacy Evans,” *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 13, no. 4 (2009): 373–94; Chesser, *Parting with my Sex*.

¹² Chesser, *Parting with my Sex*; Bongiorno, *The Sex Lives of Australians*; Davies, “Sexuality, Performance, and Spectatorship in Law,” 389–408.

¹³ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1990).

¹⁴ See Ben Pickman and Brandon Griggs, “The World Health Organization Will Stop Classifying Transgender People as Mentally Ill,” *CNN*, 20 June 2018. <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/06/20/health/transgender-people-no-longer-considered-mentally-ill-trnd/index.html>, accessed 16 November 2018.

those people who did not identify with their sex assigned at birth, but who unlike transsexuals—a term popularised in the 1950s—did not seek medical intervention.¹⁵ By the 2000s, it had evolved into what historian Susan Stryker defines as “an umbrella term representing all types of non-normative expressions of gender or sexed embodiment”.¹⁶ Given the etymology of “transgender”, a number of historians have argued that labelling examples before the word existed is anachronistic. As Ruth Ford summarises: “It is ahistorical to label them [historical identities] in 1990s terminology as female-to-male transnians, transgender, transsexual or as queer, nor is it appropriate to reconstruct their subjectivities out of their historical contexts. We should instead seek to understand how they saw themselves.”¹⁷

If, as Foucault argues, there is a social control element in how discourse shapes trans people, then uncovering fragments of the lives of gender non-conforming people might extend historical understandings about gender in eras when discourses rendered gender-diverse people less able to articulate their sense of self or to connect to a group identity. This is the very reason that transgender historians such as Leslie Feinberg and Susan Stryker argue that finding historical examples of gender diversity can empower transgender people as experts in their own histories and can contribute to their liberation.¹⁸ Of course, a flipped interpretation could be that the lack of controlling discourses about trans people meant that gender non-conformists felt greater freedom to express themselves, unhindered by the

¹⁵ Kelly Jacob Rawson and Cristan Williams, “Transgender*: The Rhetorical Landscape of a Term,” *Present Tense* 3, no. 2 (2014): 1–9.

¹⁶ Susan Stryker, “The Transgender Issue: An Introduction,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 4, no. 2 (1998): 152.

¹⁷ Ruth Ford, “‘And Merrily Rang the Bells’: Gender-Crossing and Same-Sex Marriage in Australia, 1900–1940,” in *Australia's Homosexual Histories: Gay and Lesbian Perspectives* 5, ed. David Phillips and Graham Willett (Sydney: Australia's Centre for Lesbian and Gay Research, 2000), 42–43.

¹⁸ Susan Stryker, *Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution*, 2nd ed. (New York: Seal Press, 2017); Leslie Feinberg, *Trans/Gender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to Dennis Rodman* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996); M. W. Bychowski et al., “‘Trans*Historicities’: A Roundtable Discussion,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 5, no. 4 (2018): 658–85; Kritika Agarwal, “What Is Trans History? From Activist and Academic Roots, a Field Takes Shape,” *Perspectives on History*, 1 May 2018. <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/may-2018/what-is-trans-history-from-activist-and-academic-roots-a-field-takes-shape>.

stigmas attached to such latter controlling discourses. Across time, regions and cultures, there have been spaces for third genders that were accepted norms, as well as examples of people who transgressed the socially constructed bounds of gender normativity.¹⁹ Therefore, as historian Genny Beemyn advocates:

The best that we as historians can do is to acknowledge individuals whose actions would seem to indicate that they might be what we would call “transgender” or “transsexual” today without necessarily referring to them as such and to distinguish them from individuals who might have presented as a gender different from the one assigned to them at birth for reasons other than a sense of gender difference.²⁰

Recent scholarship argues that, even if labelling past identities is problematic, there is scope to *imagine* past people as conceiving their gender identities in more diverse categories than the language of the era may have allowed. The emerging field of trans history emphasises imagination as method: in the absence of people able to articulate their gender identities, imagining trans possibilities is a way to rethink how people navigated, challenged or transgressed gender constructs. Trans historians see imagination as a strength, for as M. W. Bychowski summarises: “Historians often have to use a degree of imagination (checked by evidence) to fill in the gaps and silences. History as it reaches out to us through texts, relics, traditions, and absences will often work symbiotically with a historian’s speculations to tell their story. All the more so it seems for transgender history.”²¹ Of course, imagining trans possibilities can never be conclusive. Amin asserts that “the ethical obligation of the transgender historiographer is not to claim an identity, however politically or academically desirable, for a historical figure of indeterminate gender, but rather to expand, as much as

¹⁹ Emily Skidmore, quoted in Agarwal, “What Is Trans History?”.

²⁰ Genny Beemyn, “Presence in the Past: A Transgender Historiography,” *Journal of Women’s History* 25, no. 4 (2013): 113.

²¹ M. W. Bychowski, in Bychowski et al., ““Trans*Historicities’,” 676.

possible, his horizon of gendered possibilities.”²² For instance, what if Watson/Hopeley really did see themselves as female or non-male? Were they perhaps comfortable with themselves, neither searching for nor requiring a language of “trans”? What would such a trans example reveal about understandings of gender in inter-war Australia? Or should we still apply the language of the era, limited though it may be, and concomitantly reinforce repressive categories both in the past and in the present?

A historian can find themselves going around in circles trying to avoid presentist language to research, analyse, imagine and write about past cases of gender non-normativity. A recent special issue of *Past and Present* focused on presentism, or applying contemporary concepts to analyse the past. Several contributors point out that historians regularly apply present-day conceptual lenses to the past, so presentism is inevitable in any historical research. Moreover, the authors all argue that scholars *should* analyse histories through present-day conceptual lenses because of the very questions they may raise, and the insights they may produce, about the past.²³ Robin Osborne argues: “It is precisely by thinking about how a past society without our concepts dealt with what we understand using the concepts that it did not have that we come to understand that society better.”²⁴ Miri Rubin calls the use of presentist concepts to analyse the past a “controlled anachronism”, which can produce dynamic insights into the past.²⁵ Indeed, using imagination along with strategic, controlled anachronisms can challenge historicist thinking about categories such as (trans)gender.²⁶

²² Amin, “Ghosting Transgender Historicity in Colette’s *The Pure and the Impure*,” 127.

²³ Catherine Hall, “Thinking Reflexively: Opening ‘Blind Eyes’,” *Past and Present* 234, no. 1 (2017): 254–63; Miri Rubin, “Presentism’s Useful Anachronisms,” *Past and Present* 234, no. 1 (2017): 236–44; Alexandra Walsham, “Introduction: Past and ... Presentism,” *Past and Present* 234, no. 1 (2017): 213–17.

²⁴ Robin Osborne, “Classical Presentism,” 219.

²⁵ Rubin, “Presentism’s Useful Anachronisms,” 242–43.

²⁶ Leah DeVun and Zeb Tortorici, “Trans, Time, and History,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 5, no. 4 (2018): 520.

Kelly Rawson argues that historians need to unlearn transgender as a category when searching archives for cases of gender non-normativity.²⁷ Bychowski similarly notes that when looking at trans history, “tools and methods of study and storytelling must time and again be adapted (if not outright reinvented) to accurately depict elements of history”.²⁸ Such an approach does not project transgender labels into the past, but instead provides historians with language to historicise and problematise the categorisation of binary gender identities. As Kritika Agarwal summarises, “This interpretation [of trans history] moves scholarship away from a search for trans people in the past and toward using trans as a lens through which to see the world. It permits one to ask new questions about gender categories and other forms of human difference.”²⁹

The concept of transhistoricity more specifically disrupts the potentially paralysing paradox of searching for trans histories before transgender “existed”. Transhistoricity is itself vaguely defined, though intentionally so. Leah DeVun and Zeb Tortorici argue that transhistoricity “show how trans might be theorized through (a)historical comparison without making definitive or appropriative claims about what counts as a trans past (or present), but also without dismissing the investments that shape our relations to historical subjects, and their effects on both identity and community”.³⁰ They express transhistoricity as a methodology:

providing language to describe embodiment across time, and forging a creative space in which evidentiary and imaginative gestures might meet.

Many of these analyses depend on explicit comparisons between trans in the past and trans in the present, and a number of them foreground the emotional

²⁷ Kelly Jacob Rawson, “Accessing Transgender // Desiring Queer(Er?) Archival Logics,” *Archivaria*, no. 68 (2009): 134.

²⁸ Bychowski, in Bychowski et al., “‘Trans*Historicities’,” 667.

²⁹ Agarwal, “What Is Trans History?”

³⁰ DeVun and Tortorici, “Trans, Time, and History,” 534.

needs of living trans people now. They also ask: To what extent must such comparisons assume that we can recognize trans-like phenomena, whether now or before, and that now and before constitute discrete and incommensurate temporal regimes?³¹

Thus, thinking of trans as a lens or method, rather than a set identity, may give new language, explanations and possibilities to historical examples. As Mary Weismantel explains, transhistoricity may make meaning out of a “past [that] had to wait for transgender scholarship to arrive”.³²

Even taking a transhistoricity approach to early 20th century Australia has its challenges because historical records are couched in the moral, legal and medical binary discourses of the era. The legal system has always had a significant role in cases of cross-dressing, whether through using vagrancy laws or other criminal codes to police sexuality and gender normativity.³³ By the 1930s, sexologists were intervening in public debates about sex, sexuality and gender.³⁴ Therefore, as there were new emerging ideas about sexuality and gender, these medical understandings became a new mechanism to police binary gender norms. Scholars thus need to be careful to read against the grain, searching for trans voices that struggled against those in power who were writing about them.³⁵ Maria Ochoa describes such histories as complex and messy—and necessarily so because they reveal how trans people coped with the power structures operating in/over their lives.³⁶

Even translating between past and present language can be tricky, though this in itself may also be revealing. Only one cross-dressing figure from pre–Second World War Australia

³¹ DeVun and Tortorici, “Trans, Time, and History,” 533–34.

³² Mary Weismantel, “Towards a Transgender Archaeology: A Queer Rampage through Prehistory,” in *The Transgender Studies Reader 2*, ed. Susan Stryker and Aren Z. Aizura (New York: Routledge, 2013), 321.

³³ Davies, “Sexuality, Performance, and Spectatorship in Law: The Case of Gordon Lawrence, Melbourne, 1888,” 389–408.

³⁴ Bongiorno, *The Sex Lives of Australians*, 167–75; Ford, “Sexuality and ‘Madness’,” 109–10.

³⁵ Agarwal, “What is Trans History?”

³⁶ Ochoa, in Bychowski et al., “‘Trans*Historicities’,” 673.

published a memoir, and this was a female who adopted a man's identity.³⁷ In most cases, finding the language that cross-dressers used to describe themselves and their gender is challenging because the source base is limited to newspaper articles, which only occasionally feature quotes. Importantly, these people may not have sought or desired language to articulate their sense of self, as labels may define but they also restrict. Given such limited resources, Clare Sears's conceptual approach of transing analysis is a useful way to imagine trans possibilities. Sears builds on queer theory's shift away from essentialist identities, instead focusing on historical *practices* of gender non-normativity that challenged the social and cultural gender binaries of the time.³⁸ Newspaper articles describing gender practices reveal what was seen as (non-)normative. The public status of newspapers and the cases presented are particularly important: efforts to police the boundaries of normative gender were a direct response to public transgressions.³⁹ Given the complexity of transing analysis, as well as the different social anxieties about female versus male sexuality and behaviour, this article cannot cover all gender non-normative behaviours. Other historians have already addressed high-profile cases of Australian women dressed as males,⁴⁰ so this article focuses on men dressed as females as a site for transing analysis.

Trans-ing Australian Males Dressed as Women

³⁷ Marion Edwards, *Life and Adventures of Marion-Bill-Edwards: The Most Celebrated Man-Woman of Modern Times* (Melbourne: W. H. Junior, c.1907); Reekie, "She Was a Lovable Man," 43–50.

³⁸ Clare Sears, *Arresting Dress: Cross-Dressing, Law, and Fascination in Nineteenth-Century San Francisco* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 8–10. See also C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

³⁹ Clare Sears, "Electric Brilliancy: Cross-Dressing Law and Freak Show Displays in Nineteenth-Century San Francisco," in *The Transgender Studies Reader 2*, ed. Susan Stryker and Aren Z. Aizura (New York: Routledge, 2013), 554–64; Amin, "Ghosting Transgender Historicity," 129.

⁴⁰ Colligan, "The Mysterious Edward/Ellen De Lacy Evans: The Picaresque in Real Life," 59–68; Ford, "'Prove First You're a Male'," 1–21; "Sexuality and 'Madness'," 109–19; "'The Man-Woman Murderer': Sex Fraud, Sexual Inversion and the Unmentionable 'Article' in 1920s Australia," 158–96; Reekie, "She Was a Lovable Man," 43–50; Chesser, "Transgender-Approximate, Lesbian-Like, and Genderqueer," 373–94.

Men arrested for cross-dressing were aware of their gender transgression and searched for explanations that could at least mitigate the situation, and at best prove socially acceptable. Often the accused would argue in court that their dress was a joke, part of a bet or an isolated case. This is unsurprising given the long history of men impersonating women for theatrical performances, and Chesser notes that theatre and (elite) social functions were socially acceptable sites of cross-dressing.⁴¹ Indeed, the theatre functioned as a culturally safe space where performers and audiences could enjoy cross-dressing without fear of prosecution or ridicule. Therefore, successfully arguing that a gender performance was meant for humour was a possible path to maintaining respectability. Of course, there were times when someone was genuinely dressing as a joke or as part of a performance. For instance, in one case from December 1923, Leonard Keith was arrested in Melbourne wearing a crepe de chine, stockings and a necklace. The magistrate dismissed the case when Keith argued that he was dressed as a woman at a carnival where people would win a prize if they guessed he was a man.⁴²

Other cases were less clear about a “legitimate” theatrical or comical purpose for cross-dressing. Cases when someone was dressing for theatre or as a joke were, broadly speaking, less likely to lead to arrest and prosecution. In January 1915, Lindsay Campbell claimed to have made a bet with friends that he could go around Adelaide for two months dressed as a woman and not be caught by police. Campbell claimed to have met numerous men who even took him to supper and the theatre.⁴³ A similar, more elaborate example was from August 1915, when police in Sydney arrested a man dressed in women’s clothing and who appeared to be a “charming young lady”. The accused claimed that a friend bet him to place advertisements in the newspaper and, dressed as a woman, rent a house, hire a

⁴¹ *Parting with my Sex*, 78–88.

⁴² “Man Dressed as Woman; Police Charge Fails,” *Argus*, 1 December 1923, 33.

⁴³ “Dressed as a Woman; Adelaide Man Fined,” *Weekly Times* (Melbourne), 16 January 1915, 32.

housemaid and employ a gardener. The individual had proven so adept at playing a woman that they often dressed up at night, and men would treat him to a life of luxury. The *Sun* reported: “Theatres, supper, parties, and motor drives frequently came his way. The police say that he told them that he had on one occasion gone through the marriage ceremony.”⁴⁴ This is an intriguing example because it shows an individual who secured economic and social gain through performing femininity. What is unclear in the press coverage is whether they genuinely adopted a woman’s identity, or merely did this to please their suitors.

The majority of press cases resulted in a conviction and fine, indicating that the magistrates did not accept the joke defence. Most articles are short and lack any indication of the court proceedings or the magistrates’ reasoning. In some cases, readers can infer that cross-dressing was more than just a joke or a bet. For instance, in May 1921, George Augustus Rocake was arrested in Sydney dressed as a woman. The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported, “The Magistrate asked Rocake why he wanted to get about dressed as he was. Rocake replied that he only did it about once a fortnight, and did it only for a joke; there was no ulterior motive.” It seems odd that Rocake would perform femininity as a joke every fortnight; moreover, the same article reported that Rocake had been seen dressing as a woman by night for the past 12 months.⁴⁵ Garber argues that “cross-dressing can be ‘fun’ or ‘functional’ so long as it occupies a liminal space and a temporary time period; after this carnivalization, however ... the cross-dresser is expected to resume life as he or she was”.⁴⁶ Cases where cross-dressing was not limited in time and place were transgressive because they crossed the acceptable boundaries of gender binarism. The recurring behaviour suggests that Rocake performed femininity as more than just an occasional joke, bet or theatrical performance.

⁴⁴ “Dressed as a Woman; Man’s Impersonation; Motor Drives and Suppers,” *Sun* (Sydney), 22 August 1915, 4.

⁴⁵ “Man-Woman Case; Rocake Before Court,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 May 1921, 6.

⁴⁶ Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing & Cultural Anxiety*, 70.

Left unspoken in most reports was the undertone of (homo)sexual behaviour. Indeed, Chesser argues that between the wars, “The overt *homosexualisation* of cross-dressing represented a significant and defining addition to the diffuse plurality of meanings that informed cultural understandings of cross-dressing prior to World War One.”⁴⁷ A May 1924 report indicated that 19-year-old waiter Claud Phillips, dressed as a woman, made the acquaintance of a sea-cook late at night in Sydney. A constable encountered the couple near St Mary’s Cathedral, at which time Phillips admitted to being a man.⁴⁸ This example raises several uncertainties. We do not know, for instance, whether the sea-cook was cruising for sex or even realised Phillips was biologically male. The article suggests that the constable approached Phillips in response to a complaint from the sea-cook, yet the late-night rendezvous in a known homosexual cruising space raises the possibility that he did know.⁴⁹ Phillips’s presumed homosexual agenda—and the additional possibility that he had lured/tricked the sea-cook—is what generated public anxieties worthy of the newspaper coverage, and was even reflected in the sensational headline of Phillips’s comment to the policeman: “My God! What will mother say?”

In another example from July 1922, police discovered a man dressed “in the height of female fashion” attending a dance at Sydney’s Paddington Town Hall. Like other similar reports—including the above story about Phillips—there is a dichotomy between whether or not the cross-dressers were convincing as women. The newspapers reported, “Many thought that the young man was rather a good-looking girl. He had many partners.” But there is also no explanation of how or why police became aware of their sex after only an hour. In this case, there was an extra layer of intrigue: the person was quoted as asking the police to let

⁴⁷ Chesser, *Parting with my Sex*, 321.

⁴⁸ “Dressed as a Woman; ‘What Will Mother Say?’ Waiter’s Escapade,” *Sun* (Sydney), 12 May 1924, 7.

⁴⁹ Garry Wotherspoon, *Gay Sydney: A History* (Sydney: NewSouth Publishing, 2016), 51–54.

them stay until the end of the dance because they were “having the time of his life”.⁵⁰ Was the person enjoying the attention from male suitors, reflecting possible homosexual inclinations? Or were they enjoying being seen as a woman, reflecting a possible non-normative gender identity? The newspaper focused especially on the latter possibility, closing with a description of men on a tram who still believed the person to be a woman as the police escorted them away. Susanne Davies effectively summarises the links between public fascination and anxieties over gender identity in another case from 1888:

The identification of a man who not only appeared, but could be seen by others, as a woman disturbed the naturalized and dichotomized understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality that ordered daily interactions. His appearance and behavior prompted a range of responses from bemusement and admiration to overt hostility and disdain. That this disruption was eventually overcome by his legal condemnation points to the importance of law as a mechanism through which dominant norms concerning sex, gender, and sexuality are continually constructed and imposed.⁵¹

When considering how these figures conceived their gender identities, an important distinction must be made between the public and private spheres. The cases reported in the press reflect public expressions of gender non-normativity, but they are less revealing about gender practices performed in private.⁵² Sears has written about the emergence of laws against cross-dressing in San Francisco in the 1870s as part of a wider push to restrict “problem” bodies—including Chinese immigrants, the diseased and sex workers—to the private sphere.⁵³ Australia’s respective state vagrancy laws performed a similar function,⁵⁴

⁵⁰ “Dressed as Woman; Young Man Arrested,” *Bathurst Times*, 21 July 1922, 1.

⁵¹ Davies, “Sexuality, Performance, and Spectatorship in Law,” 408.

⁵² Chesser, *Parting with my Sex*, xxi.

⁵³ Sears, *Arresting Dress*, 72–74; “Electric Brilliancy,” 555–56.

⁵⁴ Susanne Davies, “Sexuality, Performance, and Spectatorship in Law,” 396.

restricting public space while imposing a set of acceptable gender boundaries and moral values as to who would be permitted to be visible. Therefore, the majority of Australian cross-dressing cases that made the press featured people who had been caught in public. Of course, these individuals varied in the boldness of their gender performances, but none of them intended to be apprehended and face the authorities. This suggests that they *wanted* members of the public to see them as women, rather than as men impersonating women. It would be a logical next step to imagine that several of these figures had a gender identity that did not align with their sex assigned at birth.

The distinction between public and private space and its relationship to gender identity is even starker in the few reported cases of individuals exposed for cross-dressing in private. Sears argues that San Francisco laws against cross-dressing in public did not criminalise the behaviour entirely, but rather “produced a public/private divide through which cross-dressing practices could be managed”.⁵⁵ In Australia, newspaper reports of men caught cross-dressing sometimes brought the private sphere into the public domain. For instance, in June 1932, a constable arrested Walter Allison on a street in Brunswick, Melbourne, dressed in his wife’s clothes. Allison’s defence was that he had dressed as a woman to amuse their baby while the wife was out—an ostensibly private activity (though it is unclear why Allison was arrested on the street). The magistrate adjourned the case, but not before saying that such “foolish freak” was not permissible.⁵⁶ Although Allison was let off, the case reveals how laws about public morality were designed to police appropriate behaviour in the private sphere, placing pressure on those who cross-dressed.

Another case of the private being brought into the public was in February 1932, when police caught farmer Percy Douglas dressed as a woman at a hotel in Melbourne. Douglas had been staying in this semi-private space for three nights. The *Canberra Times* reported

⁵⁵ Sears, *Arresting Dress*, 73.

⁵⁶ “Dressed in Wife’s Clothes; ‘To Amuse the Baby’ He Told a Policeman,” *Sun* (Sydney), 1 June 1932, 9.

that “the defendant said that while on a lonely farm he amused himself by dressing as a woman, and decided to come to the city to see if he could carry out the impersonation”.⁵⁷

Percy Douglas’s example suggests escalations. Douglas would dress as a woman in private, then reached a point desiring to be seen as a woman in public. Yet, even in Melbourne it was at the hotel, in a private room, that the police arrested Douglas. It was only upon hearing Douglas’s husky voice upon check-in that the proprietors were alerted to contact the police.⁵⁸ These cases where the accused mentioned cross-dressing in private raise questions about motives and, particularly, gender identity. It was harder (though not impossible) to argue that they dressed as women as a joke in private.

There are even a few cases where the newspaper accounts explicitly suggest that cross-dressing individuals may have seen their gender identity as female, or at least not male. In February 1922, a constable arrested James Scott in central Sydney for being dressed as a woman. The report in the *Evening News* was longer than most, and it emphasised that numerous constables believed Scott appeared to be an almost perfect woman; only a tip-off led to Scott’s apprehension. Davies writes of the 1888 Gordon Lawrence case in Melbourne that what really drew extra condemnation was “Lawrence appeared to his audience not as a crude imitation of femaleness but, rather, as a curious and, perhaps as this journalist noted, even a strangely natural version of it”.⁵⁹ Scott was reported to have been dressing as a woman on nights and weekends “for as long as he could remember”. Significantly, Scott did not claim this to be a joke. Instead, the newspaper reported that “there seemed to be no other motive for the man’s strange conduct than a desire to be taken notice of and ‘admired as a woman’.”⁶⁰ The accused never explicitly said that they saw themselves as a woman, but the

⁵⁷ “Dressed as Woman; Man Discharged with Caution,” *Canberra Times*, 4 February 1932, 2.

⁵⁸ “Man Dressed as Woman; Stayed at City Lodging House for a Joke,” *Age*, 4 February 1932, 9.

⁵⁹ Davies, “Sexuality, Performance, and Spectatorship in Law,” 400.

⁶⁰ “Posed as a Woman for Years; Man Arrested in George St; Inquisitive Constable's Surprise,” *Evening News* (Sydney), 13 February 1922, 6.

notion that they wanted to be admired as a woman strongly suggests that they did not see their gender as exclusively (or at all) male. That they were so open about this when questioned by police is intriguing given they were not even trying to minimise their gender transgression.

In another relatively candid example, Percy Douglas Baynes of Elwood, Melbourne, was arrested in August 1935 for dressing as a woman. A police officer had followed Baynes through the city and even to a movie before finally questioning why Baynes was dressed as woman. The frank response was, “I don’t know; I must have a kink.” Baynes never interacted with anyone during this outing and was reported as saying, “I just had an urge to do it ... I purchased the women’s clothes from several different shops and dressed up after I had finished working in my house, where I live alone.” In an example reminiscent of the Watson/Hopeley case, the magistrate dismissed the charge of offensive behaviour on the grounds that there was nothing illegal about men dressing in women’s clothing. The magistrate even asserted that Baynes’s appearance as a woman was more modest than how some women dressed.⁶¹

There are two particular aspects of this case that are illuminating, and they link to Baynes’s language. The first is the word “urge”; Baynes could not articulate in 1935 language what sensation drove them to dress as a woman, but the word “urge” suggests that this came from an internal desire to express/perform femininity. The other word “kink” links to the language available in 1935. Baynes was drawing on sexological discourse, where gender non-normative behaviour is linked to ideas of sexual deviance.

Sexology: A New Language to Articulate Trans?

⁶¹ “Man Dressed in Woman’s Clothes; No Offence, Decides P. M.,” *Advertiser* (Adelaide), 15 August 1935, 10.

Earlier Australian medical journals generally did not discuss cases of cross-dressing, with the notable exception of an 1880 article in the *Australian Medical Journal*, which outlined the invasive physical exam given to Ellen Tremayne/Edward De Lacy Evans.⁶² Chesser notes that European sexology infiltrated the Australian press in the early 1900s. Most often, sexology focused on homosexuality, with cross-dressing sometimes considered as an extension of the sexual deviance and threat posed by homosexuals.⁶³ Yet, what Chesser does not discuss is theories that partly differentiated cross-dressing from homosexuality: transvestitism and eonism. In the wake of the Baynes case, Brisbane's *Telegraph* quoted a doctor specialising in psychology who described the urge to wear clothing of the opposite sex as a mental condition known as eonism, a term coined in 1928 by Havelock Ellis, extending Magnus Hirschfeld's 1910 theory of transvestitism.⁶⁴ In the *Telegraph* article, the doctor noted that "no vicious tendencies were ever exhibited, and in some cases the condition was one alternating with complete normality".⁶⁵

Neither the terms transvestitism nor eonism had significant traction in the Australian press before the Second World War, beyond some specialist sexologist readers. Australia's first mention of transvestitism was in a short 1912 story about a German baron whom a Berlin court granted permission to call a countess and to dress as a woman. The article from Melbourne's *Age* stated that "Dr. Magnus Herschfeld [*sic*], an authority on such matters, says, transvestitism has been and is common in all ages and all countries. It is an instinctive

⁶² Oliver Penfold, "A Case of Man-Personation by a Woman," *Australian Medical Journal* 2, no. 4 (1880): 145–47. In 1978, two psychiatrists re-read this article and the clinical notes and diagnosed it as a case of female transvestitism. See J. R. B. Ball and R. Emmerson, "A Case of Personation," *Medical Journal of Australia* 159, no. 2 (1978): 198–201.

⁶³ Chesser, *Parting with my Sex*, 271–317.

⁶⁴ Harry Benjamin, "Transsexualism and Transvestism as Psycho-Somatic and Somato-Psychic Syndromes," in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York: Routledge, [1954] 2006), 43–44.

⁶⁵ "Wearing Clothes of Other Sex; No Direct Prohibition in Queensland," *Telegraph* (Brisbane), 15 August 1935, 19.

desire to dress in the clothes of the opposite sex”.⁶⁶ Because the term transvestitism did not receive significant press coverage, and because sexology was still a fringe field in Australia until the 1940s, reports of cross-dressers in the 1910s and 1920s never invoked transvestitism. In one February 1926 case, a doctor testified that a person who had been arrested for cross-dressing in women’s clothes was under his care. The doctor never used the term transvestitism, but merely stated that the accused was “not physically or mentally normal, but I believe that the treatment he is now receiving will be more beneficial to him than if he were sent to gaol or a home”.⁶⁷ Though the doctor did not have the language to explain the accused’s “disorder”, his authority nevertheless marked a shift towards a medicalisation of human sexuality and gender identity.

In the 1930s, there was some emerging awareness of the international sexology discourse, at least among the psychology profession, and with some resonance in the Australian press. International cases of cross-dressing, especially from the United Kingdom, had been common in the Australian media since the mid-1800s. Nonetheless, two significant global milestones in the 1930s received only minor mentions: Lili Elbe’s momentous gender affirmation surgery in 1931 featured briefly in Brisbane’s *Telegraph*,⁶⁸ while a Czechoslovakian female-to-male surgery in 1935 appeared in a short piece in at least three Australian newspapers including Melbourne’s *Argus*.⁶⁹ Joanne Meyerowitz has written about how Americans who read about European gender affirmation surgeries in the 1930s sometimes investigated the possibility or wrote letters to the journal *Sexology*.⁷⁰ As the

⁶⁶ “Baron Wears Woman’s Clothes,” *Age*, 28 September 1912, 21.

⁶⁷ “Man in Woman’s Dressing Shelter; Masqueraded as Woman; Gets a Month, but Sentence Suspended,” *Prahran Telegraph* (Vic), 12 February 1926, 4.

⁶⁸ “Man or Woman; Amazing Case in Denmark,” *Telegraph* (Brisbane), 13 April 1931, 4.

⁶⁹ “Brief Cable News: Woman Becomes Man,” *Argus*, 30 December 1935, 8; “Remarkable Operation; Woman Changed Into Man,” *Daily Mercury* (Mackay), 30 December 1935, 6; “Woman Now a Man,” *Evening News* (Rockhampton), 30 December 1935, 10.

⁷⁰ Joanne Meyerowitz, “Sex Change and the Popular Press: Historical Notes on Transsexuality in the United States, 1930–1955,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 4, no. 2 (1998): 159–87; Joanne J.

stories of gender reassignment did not reach as wide an audience in Australia, there does not appear to be a similar phenomenon. In Australia, public awareness would come after American veteran Christine Jorgensen's successful surgery in 1951/52 received widespread media attention.

Even so, there was some knowledge among Australian psychologists about transvestitism/eonism. Besides the aforementioned Brisbane doctor's 1935 explanation of eonism, the term transvestitism appeared in the Australian press at least two other times. In August 1932, there was a response to a letter from L. V. C. in the "Talk on Health" section (like a medical Dear Abby) of Brisbane's *Sunday Mail*. Though we do not know the contents of L. V. C.'s letter, the doctor's published response talks about transvestitism/eonism. The doctor suggested that it was an inherited glandular condition caused when a mother wished for a daughter but birthed a son. The doctor further stated that "it must not be confused with homo-sexual cases; it might be described as female mind in a male body. But it is impossible to give sufficient detail here. I suggest you read Havelock Ellis's essay on Eonism, contained in the last volume of his *Studies in The Psychology of Sex*".⁷¹ The doctor's letter reveals that some professionals with awareness of the sexology and psychology literature could distinguish between transvestitism and homosexuality. Moreover, the phrase "female mind in a male body" alone alludes to a potential difference between gender (social identity) and sex (body), opening possibilities to imagine the existence of different gender identities.

Transvestitism appeared in the newspapers again covering an August 1937 case from Perth. The report, first published in the *Western Australian Clinical Reports*, described a patient who was biologically male but preferred to work as a woman. Since leaving school, the patient had worked as a domestic servant in England, as a steward on ships, then for three

Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 14–50.

⁷¹ "Replies to Queries," *Sunday Mail* (Brisbane), 14 August 1932, 21.

years as a domestic servant in New South Wales before going to Perth. The patient never ventured in public dressed as a woman. Instead, they wore a woman's uniform when working and "always [wore] female apparel at night and female underclothing by day". The doctor diagnosed the patient with the "rare condition" transvestitism and determined that it had been caused during childhood. The patient's father was away at war and the patient slept in a cot in the same room as their mother and sister, always wishing to be like the sister. The newspaper reported: "A young girl a friend of his sister used to assist him to get girls' clothes when his own girls' clothes were taken away from him. When his father returned from the war, he made a determined effort to break his son of this practice, but the mother rather sided with the patient."⁷² The doctor's diagnosis aligned with the contemporaneous understandings of transvestitism, looking for a familial cause and cure. The doctor's report indicated that "he [the patient] asserts that he has never been addicted to homosexual practices and says that he regards them with even greater loathing than he has for heterosexual indulgence".⁷³ The doctor qualified the statement as the patient's assertion, but still the doctor's diagnosis reveals early signs of de-linking sexuality from gender identity within the psychology profession.

Interestingly, whereas L. V. C.'s letter and many other cases suggest a sense of shame around their desires to cross-dress, this was not the case for the Perth patient. The doctor wrote: "The patient is not anxious to be cured of the condition. He says that when he continues working as a male he becomes progressively less efficient—usually after a good commencement—and eventually breaks down in some form of hysterical outburst. At the present time a tolerant attitude is being adopted towards him and he has been placed in congenial employment. His conduct is reported to be good and his work excellent."⁷⁴

⁷² "A Double Life; Man Works as Maid," *West Australian*, 14 August 1937, 16; R. Gwyn Williams, "A Case of Transvestitism," *Western Australian Clinical Reports* 1, no. 3 (1937): 51.

⁷³ Williams, "A Case of Transvestitism," 51.

⁷⁴ Williams, "A Case of Transvestitism," 52. See also "A Double Life," 16.

This example contrasts well with the Harcourt Payne case from the east coast two years later. Doctors examining Payne realised that he was biologically female but had been living as a man for about 20 years. Doctors determined that Payne had a confused mental state, with two marriages and over 28 years living as a man taken as proof of insanity. Even after authorities incarcerated Payne at the Orange Asylum, he refused to accept a female identity. Ford argues that had Payne convinced the doctors that, now “she” realised she was a female, they might have released “her”. Payne refused to do so, dying in the hospital the following year.⁷⁵

Whereas doctors declared Payne as certifiably insane because he would not accept his gender as a woman, in the Perth case the doctor diagnosed transvestitism and adopted a more tolerant response. There are several possibilities behind these contrasting approaches, all of which pose interesting questions about gender identity, medicine and madness on the eve of the Second World War. One possibility is that because Harcourt Payne was biologically female, claiming to be a man was seen as a more serious gender transgression. Moreover, Payne did not approach medical authorities but was caught. The Perth patient, conversely, seems to have sought psychological advice, even if they did not seek to be cured of transvestitism. It is possible the doctors in New South Wales were not aware of transvestitism, or even if they were, saw it as a disorder only affecting men—a common misconception.⁷⁶ Indeed, in a letter to the *West Australian* commenting on the transvestitism case, “Skipjack” cheekily commented, “we are still waiting to hear the medical name for the condition which makes women want to dress in man’s clothing and do man’s jobs”.⁷⁷ Finally, there is the possibility that the Perth patient may not have seen themselves as a woman. This seems unlikely given the description of how they preferred not only to wear female clothing, but also adopted a woman’s name. Even so, if Payne’s insanity were because he would not

⁷⁵ Ford, “Sexuality and ‘Madness’”, 109–19.

⁷⁶ Garber, *Vested Interests*, 44–45.

⁷⁷ “One Thing and Another,” *West Australian*, 28 August 1937, 6.

accept that he was actually female, then the Perth patient may have “accepted” being male, but one who had a desire to perform a female gender role.

Conclusion

As this article has shown, Australian newspapers present numerous trans possibilities from the 1910s to the 1930s. Of course, we can never fully understand the motivations of these individuals who were caught cross-dressing or performing a gender other than that assigned at birth. Yet, these gender non-conformists and their explanations expose a greater complexity around gender identification in people’s lived experience than the language—or journalistic coverage—of the time permitted. M. W. Bychowski argues that, as historians, “our job is then not only to help the past speak but to learn to read the ways the past gives us signs and gestures. Working symbiotically between past and present, textual and imagined histories, the trans historian and trans history can co-operate in the telling”.⁷⁸ For men dressing as women, beyond the realm of the theatre there was no socially acceptable justification for their behaviour. There were rarely social or economic advantages to be gained by adopting women’s clothing or identities, suggesting that the gender transgressions often had more personal motives. Usually those caught would say that they were joking—a plausible defence in some cases, but dubious in others.

Those few cases where the accused described an urge to cross-dress are more enlightening about trans possibilities before the Second World War. While we cannot definitively label these people as transgender, transing analysis is, as Emily Skidmore notes, a way of “conveying the open-ended nature of gender being made and remade”.⁷⁹ Only during the war would science, technology and the new global exchange ideas introduce new

⁷⁸ M. W. Bychowski, in Bychowski et al., “‘Trans*Historicities’,” 677.

⁷⁹ Emily Skidmore, *True Sex: The Lives of Trans Men at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (New York: NYU Press, 2017), 10.

possibilities and a trans language to Australia, bringing a new wave of gender expressions and identities to the fore.