



TRANSISTING  
THROUGH

**W**riting any marginalized subject into being is fraught with reliance on a vocabulary that has historically been used to impose discursive violence as the lexicon used to signify the existence of these groups was initially conceptualized to oppress them. When writing Russian, trans\* subjects into being—as this article intends to do—one has to carefully broach this issue of language as its tendency to legitimize binary oppositional logic may further violate the very individuals whose experiences the writing is intending to honour.

*This dilemma illustrates the difficulties in articulating the notion of trans\* Truth. Beyond being reliant on anglocentric expressions which have historically been weaponised against trans\* subjecthood, the recognition of the instability of the identity paradigm underlying trans\*-ness negates the existence of a stable, palatable truth to be represented in writing. Still, my preferred method of expression remains to be the written word. As I seek solace in working within this confinement, I hope that the following piece is able to critically engage with the infinite truths of trans\* existence in Russia by offering a tentative exploration of the topic. To this end, this writing operationalises the denotation trans\* by virtue of the asterisk's grammatical ability to attach to innumerable suffixed terms affirming the multiplicity of trans\* experience (Green & Bey, 2017).*

Text – Leo Ooms

In the mid-2000s, following the establishment of a collective LGBT identity, queer protest activities emerged in Russia as activists drew on the long-standing eurocentric paradigm of LGBT visibility politics. Engaging in public protest and developing an elaborate vocabulary to articulate non-heterosexual experience in the Russian Federation were strategies to advocate for queer rights (Buyantueva, 2022). While visibility can be a site of embodied resistance critical to furthering the rights of marginalized individuals, this has proven to be problematic in the context of authoritarian Russia (Edenborg, 2020; Stella, 2013, 2015). The Russian state exposes the vulnerabilities of visibility by utilising it to further dehumanise queer individuals and making them hypervisible as an alien, foreign, unified entity embodying a threat to Russia's national traditions in order to present itself as a transnational defender of traditional values (Chandler, 2021; Healey, 2019). Considering the extensive history of trans\* individuals in Russia, as evidenced by their explicit recognition by the state's legal and medical institutions throughout the 20th century, claims of queerness being a foreign import are baseless (Kirey-Sitnikova, 2025b). Still, rather than visibility being an opportunity for queer individuals to narrate their lives autonomously, its politicisation in Russia merely exacerbates the violence they experience. For trans\*

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individuals in particular, this extends to legal and medical violence, as well as everyday violence in light of their hypervisibility as transgressive individuals undermining the Russian state having resulted in rising attacks (Katsuba, 2023; Kondakov, 2022; Kirey-Sitnikova, 2025a).

In light of the increasingly repressive sphere surrounding Russian trans\* existence, activism has shifted away from a visibility paradigm towards internal community-building (Levitanius & Kislitsyna, 2024). The contemporary emergence of a trans\* autobiographical genre within Russian queer communities exemplifies these efforts. Trans\* autobiographical works directly challenge the idea of a singular Truth as it affirms the notion of limitless trans\* subjectivities by displaying a breadth of trans\* voices embodying the transformative potential of the concept. Reliance on lived experience and a first-person perspective allows the genre to be untethered from medicolegal structures of oppression, enabling trans\* individuals and their loved ones to cultivate solidarity and compassion amongst themselves (Dowling, 2022). This writing seeks to honour these efforts and trouble the notion of a singular trans\* Truth by first exploring its historical distortions from a medical and legal perspective, before juxtaposing this with

contemporary Russian trans\* autobiographical articulations. In doing so, this article hopes to embed Russian trans\* activism within Black feminist thought as it argues for the applicability of an ethic of love. To do so, the article relies on Vykhod's [выход] collection of trans\* autobiographical stories entitled "We're Here: A Collection of trans\* Stories" [Мы здесь. Сборник транс\*историй] (2017). Rather than highlight individual works, this piece regards the collection of autobiographical works as a whole and refuses to reiterate these stories to respect the agency of individual authors.

Engagement with sensitive materials originating from a highly marginalised group necessitates acknowledgement of the researcher's positionality. As a rather vocal and visible trans\*, queer researcher, I find that my lived experiences are intricately connected to those described in the autobiographical works. This allows me to move through them with ease and care, finding familiarity and sanctuary within the transnational community, while maintaining a relevant distance as I am not Russian myself. Despite my trans\* identity, this piece undoubtedly furthers the problematic politics of visibility by articulating non-cisgender identities in an academic setting (Buyantueva & Shevtsova, 2021). Therefore, it is important for academics writing on trans\* lifecourses to be cognisant of this and ensure that the safety of trans\* individuals remain at the core of their writing.

## RUSSIAN MEDICOLEGAL TRANS\* HISTORY

To counter the view that identities fulfilling the demands of the non-traditional epithet that has become mainstream in contemporary Russian politics are Western imports, the following section traces Russia's institutionalised trans history. It should be noted that tracing trans\* lives in historical discourse is realistically impossible as their lives were frequently conflated with homosexuals or—as with penal transsexuality—simply seen as performative (Rachamimov, 2006). To illustrate, it is relevant to consider a widespread attitude of Russian doctors towards lesbians as individuals who must have their sex surgically changed to correct their transgression from heterosexuality (Stella, 2015). If we consider the occurrence of phalloplasty as evidence of a trans\* life, then these individuals would supposedly

be included in the scope of this article. Healey (2019) aptly describes the many issues present in biographical works seeking to represent trans\* lives: "Falsification, evasion, silence, trivialization, mistranslation, contempt, voyeurism" (p. 193).

Still, this article traces the modern, top-down recognition of gender-variance to the establishment of sexology in the early 20th century. In the 1920s and 1930s, Soviet sexology emerged as a scientific discipline concerned primarily with supposedly curing intersex individuals by performing sex-change operations which inadvertently revolutionised the field of gender-affirming care (Kirey-Sitnikova, 2025b). The lack of clear guidelines and vaguely liberal attitudes of Soviet sexologists enabled trans\* individuals to access these treatments, if they were able to pose as intersex or hermaphrodites, a term which was more prevalent in Soviet discourse (Healey, 2019). Following the use of loopholes, the 1960s and 1970s formally marked the emergence of gender-affirming surgeries explicitly intended for trans\* individuals. This emergence was accompanied by numerous decrees enabling the change of legal sex and name which was institutionalised in legal practice both in 1976 and 1997 (Kirey-Sitnikova, 2025a). Despite these formal arrangements enabling trans\* individuals to obtain legal and medical gender recognition and supposedly affirming their livelihoods, recognition was reliant on trans\* people engaging in a further violation of their own truth.

Accessing institutional arrangements involves a careful bureaucratic balancing act, where individuals have to prove their identities by obtaining a certificate from a medical commission consisting of a psychiatrist, sexologist, and a medical psychologist. This requires trans\* individuals to reframe their livelihoods to align with a particular notion of trans normativity to access care (Halberstam, 2005). This normativity entails presenting an experience of disproportionate suffering due to the incongruence of their psychological experience of gender and their body. If a trans\* individual delivers a convincing performance, then medical and legal staff might provide them with adequate care, but this is reliant on a delicate framing of their gender identity which does not leave room for discrepancies or doubts. This enables the occurrence of a medical transition which cures all ailments by aligning trans\* people's gender and sex, making them a comprehensible individual who fits neatly into the category of woman or man once again. This

transnormative structure represents the margins of trans\* experience, as it affirms only those who embody binary transness and wish to engage in a convincing performance of masculinity or femininity the moment their body aligns with female or male norms. Beyond these structures delegitimising non-binary existence, binary trans\* individuals also undergo significant stress in aggrandising their suffering to awaken enough pity in professionals to allow them care. Expectations of a transnormative lifecourse persist in the Russian Federation, and in most other countries, as even despite the 2023 prohibition on gender-affirming care, there are still trans\* individuals seeking informal care (Kirey-Sitnikova, 2025a).

Knowing this, it is shortsighted for anyone to claim trans\* identity is a foreign import, as Russian history is exceedingly marked by instances of social, medical and legal gender incongruence. These episodes have resulted in the establishment of clear boundaries that mark trans\* existence within the realms of a bureaucratic truth.

## A TRANS\* TROUBLING OF TRUTH

While it is an interesting endeavor to unearth trans\* history through institutional narratives, it is one that is fundamentally opposed to the humanisation of contemporary trans\* individuals who seek to reclaim the written word. This is at the centre of Vykhod's autobiographical collection, as trans\* authors rewrite their own lives to affirm their humanity and connect to others. To respect authors in Vykhod's collection (2017), I do not wish to include excerpts from the writing as it would feel disrespectful and counterintuitive to cherry-pick phrases convenient to further this article's argument when attempting to honour trans\* lives. As the collection is publicly available, the referenced text can be easily uncovered and can thus deepen individuals' understanding of trans\* existence.

Following the public silencing of trans\* voices through repressive legislation—such as the 2023 law framing queer individuals as extremists and the 2023


prohibition of gender-affirming care—these stories assume an introspective character as they are created for circulation within the queer community (Dowling, 2022). Writers in the collection explicitly state worries regarding their ability to remain anonymous following its publication in light of the danger of social repercussions were they to be outed. This is particularly evident for trans\* feminine individuals whose gender identity is seen to violate the traditional masculinity so

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pervasive within contemporary Russian society (Edenborg, 2020). Their visible transgression of hegemonic gender norms already imposes an insecurity, resulting in a lack of willingness to further risk their safety to engage in community-building with others. The collection clearly acknowledges the intent for these works to remain within

the community. This is reflected in narratives that recognise the fluidity of identity, as the works are unconcerned with palatability to a wider audience, as the sole reason many trans\* individuals cling onto labels and the transnormative narratives of extensive suffering is to legitimise themselves to access care or aid (p. 76). Rather than situate themselves in the identity paradigm that has informed visibility politics and medicolegal violence, some reject any notion of gender altogether (p. 119, 144). Beyond refusing to render an image of trans\* livelihoods comprehensible to cisgender presumptions of gender, authors highlight moments of doubt which remain at the core of non-normative identity formation (p. 34; p. 42). Truth here does not assume a stable form, it fluctuates and is shown as inherently disorienting for lives whose bodily existence marks a departure from normative social existence. Unstable representations of truth are critical in moving beyond the imposition of medical and legal constructions of trans\* existence as they are reliant on the imposition of a consistent vocabulary to systematically categorise and erase non-normative gender experiences (Kirey-Sitnikova, 2025b). The refusal to engage in this is an act of resistance towards these institutions. Though this resistance need not be publicised—as it is naive to assume the current Russian state would be receptive to any such claims—its reiteration in these works provides ample support for trans\* individuals as their discomfort with the

institutional architecture is affirmed.

These trans\* life stories are ways of strengthening community bonds that allow individuals to move beyond self-interest in challenging their oppression at the hands of the Russian state by fostering mutual understanding and care. In doing so, the collection recognises the centrality of love to the affirmation of trans\* gender as loved ones, particularly those who are also trans\*, allow for an individual to soften, enabling them to move beyond the experience of domination and feel alive (p. 27). This notion aligns with hooks' love ethic (1996; 1998), which is framed as an ethical approach against oppression by recognising various interlocking systems of domination. Rather than this collection being centred around the individuality of experience, the stories expose an inherent love and appreciation for humanity as a whole. Despite the oppression many individuals in the collection suffer, they make an active effort to extend kindness to others by recognising their humanity (p. 183). Awareness and community are critical to make sense of how systems of power have shaped one's experiences and understandings of self, and to reclaim love for personal and political recovery. In doing so, a love ethic provides a radical alternative to identity politics by emphasising community and commitments to ending another's oppression and exploitation. This claim mirrors the intent of the collection as one of the editors expressed the wish for the stories to not merely represent individual views, but be utilised as a voice for the collective Russophone trans\* community (p. 6). By cultivating a space for themselves through the written word, the trans\* individuals in this collection have effectively extended themselves to reclaim their own humanity and aid others who require the same, in light of the dehumanisation trans\* individuals face. 

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