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ABSTRACT

Trans life writing in South Africa remains scarce, underexplored and under-researched. Yet scholarly engagement with this nascent modality has the potential not only to contribute to thinking around auto/biographical narration, but to change the lives of transgender people by improving society's understanding of trans lived experience. This article argues for a range of even more othered, more precarious South African trans narratives to be included within the emergent body of trans life accounts, where conventionally published, full-length memoirs by writers such as Anastacia Thompson and Landa Mabenge are given visibility and could perhaps be seen to emphasise more normative elements of transitioning. This study advocates for informal, unpublished, ongoing, processual forms of life narration, such as conversational encounter and anecdote, which often foreground ideas of trans representation and transitioning as ongoing trans-ing,[1] rather than popularly dominant, medicalised narratives of before-and-after surgery, pre-op and post-transition. The use of a fragmented, pluri-textual approach to the subject matter and episodic recounting of trans lives disrupts transnormative narratives and their conceptual linearity; arguing for forms of trans life narration that connect 'the self' to a community that is variously evidenced *and* constantly in process, present and yet constantly under threat of erasure. This is "an interpretive strategy allowing for reading lives preserved only fragmentarily, in ephemeral form."[2] This strategy surfaces alternative trans life narration, potentially as a form of activism that transgresses dominant discourses on transitioning by attending to the everyday actions of trans people. Drawing on Paul B. Preciado's activist trans life writing, we reposition ordinary trans South Africans as agents of change, who "burrow in and virally disrupt the smoothness and closure on which" dominant trans discourses of becoming depend.[3] The tumultuous political history of South Africa positions trans narratives as catalysts for change, with the transformative power to challenge institutional practices that oppress marginalised identities based on gender and sexual orientation. Trans people deliberately write themselves into the country's history and political legacy. This strategy aims to work towards greater inclusivity for trans people when seeking to add/redress the wrongs committed against the community.

INTRODUCING TRANS LIFE (WRITING) AND ACTIVISM

Trans lives in South Africa take on deeply personal and political qualities that enable trans people to act and be repositioned as knowledge producers, change makers and educational facilitators. Unsurprisingly, then, trans "[a]ctivism manifests in different shapes and forms."[4] Despite still being one of the most unequal countries in the world, post-apartheid South Africa owes its democratic and constitutional advancements to the written and physical works of activists and South African trans activism, situated within a long history of activism, has manifested itself in sites such as non-governmental organisations,[5] education,[6] artistic performances,[7] policy,[8] political movements[9] and literature.[10] The present article addresses trans life narration as a form of activism that involves working with and across multiple, intersecting and diverse literary and socio-political spheres. These agentive practices enable trans people to work with both the negative and positive aspects of trans becoming and trans representation to effect change in their day-to-day lives. South African trans activism is rooted in the stories trans people tell, attesting to the confluence of life narration, transness and activism to be found in accounts of trans people overcoming political exclusion and injustice and working to secure the validity of transness as a mode of being. Trans life narration as activist agency goes beyond obvious issues of visibility and access, delving deeper into the very question of transness as socio-political existence while recognising the many ways in which trans persons' human rights, as well as their personal responsibilities, to themselves and others like them, shape their realities.

Even before we address literary manifestations of trans activism, we emphasise that South African trans activism can be viewed as an interactive and collaborative response to the dominant restrictions of cis-heteronormativity in society and politics.[11] To respond to the damaging, restrictive practices of entrenched norms and stigma, trans people have to be deliberately disruptive to cause change. This can be effected across both small and more dramatic fronts. For example, as Ryan Thorseon describes, by focusing on the "micropolitics of everyday life," trans people develop quotidian tactics that "invoke the Constitution" to creatively and proactively respond to the aggression of cisnormative institutional and legislative practices.[12]

Thoreson notes that "since the end of apartheid, at least some trans … mobilising has taken place," especially in NGOs, to advance the rights and protections of trans people in South Africa, and this mobilisation has been institutionalised in the expressly political work done by trans activists.[13] Gender Dynamix, a trans-led organisation in Cape Town, has championed the rights of trans people, advocating for and providing psychological, medical and social support for the most marginalised in the trans community. Yet, as B Camminga observes, such organisations, which "work endlessly under less than perfect conditions, financial and otherwise," are still under-recognised, despite the spaces they provide being fundamental to how many trans people "survive and thrive" within the country.[14] South African scholars have also notably conceptualised trans activism and illustrated how trans people engage with the country's institutions, its social architecture and political makeup. Dennis Francis, in *Queer Activism in South African Education* (2023),[15] attempts to map out the many ways trans and gender diverse scholars are resisting and countering the normalisation of cisheteronormative "education practices, discourses and structures" in South African schools.

Such trans-activist attempts are important to our own wish to position trans life narration as entailing activism. Accordingly, our choice of materials for discussion is premised on the transformative potential of including othered, underrepresented and alternative forms of trans life storying alongside more familiar individual memoirs, so as to cover a wider range of content and insight into how trans people narrate their lives. Here, we suggest that this storying is a narrative analogue which extends and deepens the activism of existing scholarship on trans lives in education contexts. For example, Camminga, in *Transgender Refugees and The Imagined South Africa: Bodies Over Borders and Borders Over Bodies* (2019), has revealed the experiences and challenges of trans refugees and asylum seekers who come to South Africa. Crucial to Camminga's method is sharing stories of "resilience, struggle and survival," since such stories become part of the "travels and tales of trans identity and existence around the globe" that seek to change both people's opinions of and policies on trans issues.[16] Jean Prinsloo's conspicuously early (2011) study on how trans youth negotiate their identities online found that the internet has the potential to foster a sense of community and enable trans people not only to enact their identities, but to share experiences, disclose emotions and go beyond simply "identifying an issue or stating the commencement of a stage of transitioning."[17] In online contexts, individual personae share personal topics that are uncommon in the transnormative discourse that characterises typical social 'understandings' of transness, yet which are significant to the processing of trans people's experiences and their ongoing trans becoming. This is supported by Camminga and Zethu Matebeni, who, in examining the links between "activism, activist writing and queer scholarship in the [South] African context," focus on experiences "that go beyond" traditionally researched concepts and phenomena associated with trans lives, such as medically transitioning and accessing hormones, the ways transness has been pathologised and familiar leitmotifs of coming out and familial rejection.[18] Notably, Camminga and Matebeni also emphasise the need for "new perspectives and new scholarship by working with young scholars and with those not yet fully established in the field."[19] Such initiatives serve to, in the words of Katrina M. Powell, "highlight the ways writers write out of turn and dismantle the power structures that serve to reify dominant narratives" of the trans self, trans-ing and trans life narration.[20]

Positioning trans life narration within South Africa's history of activism enables us to reframe and examine the ordinary, practical ways in which trans life engages with both the literary and socio-political structures that inhibit alternative forms of transness. In this article, we argue that we can situate elements of South African trans life writing as activism, offering new, critical perspectives on how trans people author accounts of their lives. We provide insight into both the experiential and expressive mechanisms of activist trans life writing, suggesting that such life storying has the power to validate trans lives, transform cis people's understanding of transness and influence policies on transgender justice. Part of our focus falls on the well-established life writing genre (and mode) of memoir, albeit that this familiar form and method is used to shape the comparatively unfamiliar terrain, in cishet society, of trans experience. Here, our texts are *Becoming Him: A Trans Memoir of Triumph* (2018) by Landa Mabenge and *Always Anastacia: A Transgender Life in South Africa* (2016) by Anastacia Tomson.[21] However, a further part of our focus extends to a range of othered, more precarious trans life narratives, beyond those brought to public attention via conventional print publishing.

This wider ambit enables us to broaden the present narrowness (and indeed scarcity) that characterises the still emergent genre of South African trans life writing. Through examining conventionally-published life stories as well as conversations had with ordinary trans people, we explore how trans people seek to story themselves both in response to *and* generatively beyond the narrows of existing transnormative discourse, a tactic which enables them to do a form of literary activism, "burrow[ing] in and virally disrupt[ing] the smoothness and closure on which" hegemonic discourse depends.[22]

In this study we explore a range of forms of life 'storying.' First, we explore how conventionally published forms of trans life writing in South Africa break and disrupt normative expectations. Second, we move on to consider forms of spoken narration and magazine features that contribute to this emerging body of disruptive and ontological literature.

EXPLORING FRAGMENTS OF TRANS LIFE WRITING/NARRATION *AS* ACTIVISM

Life writing draws on the lived experiences of people, and how their lives, or parts of them, are composed.[23] The study of how lives are written has been re-conceptualised to reflect the varied and multifaceted work done within the field. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson have worked to define different kinds of life writing as writing that is self-referential—that narrates "the story of one's life written by" themselves.[24] While there are many modes of writing about the self, life writing presents authors with possibilities to experiment with the subject matter, form, structure and style of their life narratives, enabling them to create experientially innovative and rich stories that reflect on how their lives are lived and how they make sense of their identity and world. Hélène Cixous has theorised life writing as a process that "circulates, caresses and paints all the phenomena before they are precipitated, assembled and crystallised in a word," a process that happens before a life is transcribed and narrated to others.[25] These theorisations inform our analysis of how trans lives are variously and disruptively written and narrated in South African forms of unconventional literature.

Trans life writing is still a nascent genre in South Africa, with few formally-published examples of trans memoir or auto/biography. An example of conventional transnormative life writing is the 2022 memoir of Elise Bishop, *Twee Lewens* (Two Lives), which traces her journey to becoming a woman during apartheid, conforming to socio-cultural constructions of gender and obtaining gender reassignment surgery.[26] The most prominent examples, however, are the aforementioned memoirs of trans authors Mabenge and Tomson, which document their lives and transitioning trajectories. Mabenge comes from Umtata, a profoundly traditional town in the Eastern Cape, and his brutally honest account of his upbringing as a black trans man illustrates the realities of what it means to grow up being gender diverse in an ideologically conservative community shaped by strict, binary definitions of man and woman. In contrast, Tomson's upbringing as a white Jewish trans woman from Pretoria (although also harrowing), demonstrates that, despite her privileged position, she faced multiple obstacles throughout her medical, social and legal transition. A further recent example of South African trans life writing is Tshiamo Modisane's *I am Tshiamo: My transition to Self-acceptance and Womanhood* (2025).[27] Modisane, a black trans woman from a

township in Johannesburg, always knew that she was a girl, despite being expected to conform to her culture's expectations and assumptions of what it means to be black and male. Modisane's memoir illustrates how, very early in her life, she sought to live in keeping with her felt gender expression. Each of these contemporary texts could be considered a conventional form of transnormative life writing, but they also, in their own way, disrupt normative assumptions about trans life by locating their stories and differing trans trajectories within the (South) African context.

Beyond individually-authored trans memoirs, a distinctive local example of trans life writing is *Trans: Transgender Life Stories from South Africa* (2009),[28] edited by Ruth Morgan, Charl Marais and Joy Rosemary Wellbeloved, a collection of trans life stories from all walks of South African life, both pre- and post-democracy. The range of experiences and contexts gives transness in South Africa both a deep and varied lived timeline. This volume features 30 original voices which collectively serve to re-collate individual narration as a collective voicing of a trans community, and all contributors were involved in the writing, editing and shaping of the book. The editors note that the "book is long overdue," as it fills a gap in South African trans literature that emergent and isolated trans people can benefit from, seeing their lives represented and affirmed.[29] The diverse trans life stories bring readers into the varied worlds of trans people, asserting that "there is no right or wrong way of being trans" and illustrating something of the "choices [that] are available," along with the personal and systemic constraints that influence how transness is able to materialise in South Africa.[30] Here, too, we acknowledge MambaOnline, a news organisation that curated a series of articles written by trans people in a 2025 digital collection, 'Project Transcend,' documenting their lives and experiences.[31] This collection addresses topics such as spirituality, addiction, economic exclusion and mental health, spotlighting the "challenges, experiences and achievements" of the trans community, with the aim of advancing "dignity, quality and human rights for all gender diverse individuals."[32] Clearly, while not life writing *per se*, Project Transcend unapologetically attempts to fill the life storying gap identified by Camminga and Matebeni, working digitally to take up space in conventionally normative contexts that habitually erase trans people. Further, in addressing subjects such as trans spirituality and issues of home, belonging and dignity, the online archive is producing and archiving a form of trans activist literature as life resource; it goes beyond familiar topics on trans life such as gender transition, aiming to overcome normative notions of transness and address what is missing within the trans autobiographical genre.

Purposefully positioning trans life narration as a form of activism enables us to highlight the transformative power of trans lives to inspire socio-political change by illustrating the specific challenges the group faces when going against and transgressing cisheteronormative power structures. By looking both at examples of published memoir *and* at briefer, more fragmented accounts of and angles on trans experiences, we show how trans lives serve as activism.[33] Trans lives can teach, intervene and make known the continuing work done by trans people to improve their lives and remedy the injustices done by society against the community.[34] Through positioning trans life writing as activism, we can show how essential the personal narratives of trans people are for inspiring or provoking change in transphobic society. Such claims have precedent. For instance, Duygu Erbil et al. note that the Spanish writer Paul B. Preciado

wanted to connect the everyday actions of trans people and his own personal stories to a socio-political reality that was not "dependent on the logic of sexual difference" but actively claimed space for gender divergence.[35] Preciado's vision aimed to locate trans lives beyond the technology of the psycho-medical, pharmacological architecture that tends to define trans identity in normative cishet society, and he wanted to provide the trans community with new ways of linking their experiences and narratives, outside of the transnormative requirements and expectations that are superimposed onto trans people. Through this logic, trans life accounts, reframed as activism, can enable us to view the embodied texts produced by trans people as productive forms of disruption that recognise their creative possibilities in giving a testament of trans lives where formal, published life writing formats are incompatible with the political purpose.[36]

LANDA MABENGE AND ANASTACIA TOMSON

Despite trans life writing still being a nascent genre of auto/biography, several habitual life writing characteristics seem quickly to have set some rather simplistic narrative norms for what could be termed transnormative life writing. Key tropes include: before/after; linear life storying; first being gay/straight, then trans; and having gender-affirming surgery, and only then being 'fully' or 'properly' trans. Observing Mabenge's account of his experiences in his memoir, we can see that his trans narrative and trans trajectory tend to follow a familiar chronology. He begins the account by focusing on his youth; moves on to tracing his trans origins into adulthood, where he first identified as gay and eventually concludes with how he medically transitioned and became straight.[37] Despite transness being a non-normative category of experience, Mabenge's narrative follows relatively conventional life writing parameters that have filtered into trans life storying: he recounts before and after transition, and how he *establishes* his transness only when his body medically aligns with his identity. This adherence to cisnormative expectations of before/after is what some trans authors consider the best way to legitimise and make legible their trans identity to dominant society. Mabenge's narrative patterning in his memoir corroborates the belief that medically transitioning secures and affirms one's trans identity, noting that once his surgeries are done, he can "begin to obsess about the direction" his life will take.[38] However, even though Mabenge, as writer, elects to present his trans-ing self trans-normatively, in terms of narrative arrangement, he is also gradually revealing to readers his felt sense of his authentic trans self, and this is never forfeited for easy audience acceptance. He does not placate or appease or concede. Instead, the storying illustrates that, as time went by, he felt inspired and safe enough to reveal himself not only to his birth persona but to his family and, in his memoir, to the world—an enfolded process of becoming in which he was enabled, partly through writing, to emerge as himself.

In comparison, Tomson's narrative begins in adulthood, but still follows a familiar trans life storying pattern: Tomson demonstrates that she redefined her sexuality from being a heterosexual man who dated a woman to a "demisexual and lesbian" trans woman after she transitioned.[39] Tomson's exploration of her trans identity, directly influencing her sexual orientation, asserts that trans sexuality can assume different forms. This allows her memoir to take on a particular position that counters the assumption that someone's gender identity determines their sexual orientation and who they are attracted to. Such tropes of trans becoming derive from transnormative

narratives of transitioning, which favour successful 'complete' medical transitions that are deemed respectable, legible and medically valid; these are familiar trajectories of trans becoming.[40] Through repetition, the experiential patterns around transness become normalised in society and represent trans people through a psycho-medical lens, featuring shared and familiar language that reproduces and reifies misleading tropes and misunderstandings of trans life. This reproducibility can result in increased visibility for some trans people who pass as cisgender (or are cis-assumed), but can invisibilise those who do not meet this standard. It is important to understand that such norms tend to be those of cishet society, which (whether consciously or unwittingly) subscribes to a popular, mass-mediated imaginary that expects trans people to fulfil familiar criteria so as to be legible as trans. Understood through this optic, we suggest that both Mabenge and Tomson do not merely adopt the norms, but also subtly adapt them—a form of trans authorial advocacy that enables them to unsettle the received social and discursive structures that seek to narrativise their identities via persistent ideas of normativity.

In considering trans life writing as a form of activism in the work of Mabenge and Tomson, we notice sections of their memoirs where the writers expressly disrupt expectations, even tentatively. Mabenge's emphasis on his self-reflexivity as a young child, for example, implies that trans youth can be acutely aware of their environments and, by extension, their own identity. This calls into question the accuracy of the notion that trans people are confused or mistaken about their gender identity and who they are. Mabenge, in living with his abusive mother, "knew instinctively" that he could not live freely as a trans person, and that "any defiance"—whether it be regarding their rules or deviating from gender norms—would "yield outcomes detrimental" to him.[41] In other words, while the narrative structure of Mabenge's memoir makes concessions that conform to transnormative conventions of linearity and transness as entailing a clear before/and after, the storying also suggests that a trans person may be self-aware of the dangers of entering environments largely populated by those who are unfamiliar with (or actively phobic about) trans identities and trans issues. As Mabenge's life storying indicates, such self insight enabled him to deploy mechanisms to enable forms of self-preservation. That he can write into being his trans self via both familiar and disruptive narrative patterns, positioning 'himself' through a range of victimised and agentive selves, attests to the potential of trans life storying to challenge simplistic ideas about The Self as always needing to be envisaged as a coherently integrated entity.

Tomson's memoir provides trans youth with excellent examples of how to navigate the tumultuous terrain of transgender definitions, gender dysphoria and body dysmorphia. At the same time, through narrating and reflecting on her experiences, she also gives cis readers a guide on how to respond to trans people and what truisms or denigrating platitudes to avoid. When narrating how she came out to her brother, Tomson acknowledges that "there is no rulebook for handling a loved one's coming out to you as transgender. But if there was, Leo would have broken every rule in it."[42] Leo, in his confusion, asked a multitude of questions, needing clarification on what it meant to be trans and also aiming to ascertain whether Tomson was certain of her decision to transition. Tomson recounts that she was cautious and thoughtful in response, taking the time to answer her brother's questions and to educate him. Her frank recounting of

how she needed to be aware of her own actions in relation to her brother's struggle with her coming out is both empowering and informative. While it does feature a familiar trans trope—coming out—the complexity of the narrated situation gives the lie to facile ideas of announcing one's transness once and for all, and then being done and ready to move on. The difficult reciprocity of the life storying handled by Tomson illustrates the need to allow a mutual learning from the interaction, for both trans and cis people.

Mabenge's and Tomson's memoirs embody, in the words of Douglas A, Vakoch and Sabine Sharp, "social functions of legibility and empowerment" and subtly enable the expansion of the shapes and forms that trans life narratives can take, beyond the enactment of transnormative tropes.[43] This too, we argue, constitutes a form of activist agency in contexts where transness is ostracised and the validity of trans life is habitually discounted and even erased. Mabenge's and Tomson's memoirs bring aspects of trans life storying empathetically into public discourse, highlighting both imaginative and material demands. For people who are transitioning in a society still unreflexively structured through entrenched gender binaries (Male or Female), such experiential, lived accounts can offer much-needed, validating self-representations of trans becoming, affirming transness as a legitimate way of being in the world: you have a right to exist, a right to healthcare and happiness, a right to a future.

By extension, Mabenge's and Tomson's memoirs can also be considered contemporary examples of trans literature that provide trans South Africans with a guide on how to navigate the country's bureaucratic systems, such as accessing hormone replacement therapy (HRT) to successfully self-actualise. Mabenge's first step was the self-acceptance of his trans identity, drawing from his year of experience with gender incongruity. Later, Mabenge was encouraged to "go online and read" up about his incongruence, and he discovered "a wealth of information in the form of literature and online academic journals."[44] As the memoir illustrates, this information became the launchpad for his medical transition, beginning in 2009. Mabenge recounts how he underwent several "assessments to meet the diagnostic requirements set out" to determine his transness, comprising a first meeting with a "panel of clinicians, including a psychiatrist, psychologist, social worker, endocrinologist, plastic surgeon and sexologist."[45] (The list is a telling signal of the power of medical disciplines in 'determining' valid trans lives, and of life storying.) He tells of subsequent meetings that explained how hormone replacement therapy would affect his life and what his options were regarding gender-reassignment surgery.[46] This lived account of the bureaucratic systems and practices enables other trans people who read his memoir to map out the process of accessing HRT and be better prepared for the administrative and institutional challenges. Here, too, such narrative attention given to the administrative systems that variously impede and enable transness is innovative. Our reading suggests that many trans memoirs incline to focus on the gradual unfurling of the writer's very personal experience of trans issues, rather than directly addressing systemic parameters that might assist trans people in their navigation of the world and its systems, foregoing the inclusion of strategies that could help others overcome potential hurdles. Mabenge, instead, details his appointments at the Groote Schuur Transgender Clinic, and his eventual success in being the first transman to oblige a medical aid to pay for his surgeries. This is a form of activism, which Mabenge subsequently expands into discourse in the memoir, where he narrates how he motivated and advocated for his gender affirming surgery to be paid by

his medical insurance, in the process changing the way insurers define and categorise trans healthcare.[47] Mabenge's achievement—understood in an imbricated sense as his win over medical aid, his undergoing gender-affirming surgeries and his writing and publishing of the associated memoir—is active, activist evidence of the emotional and physical efforts needed to redress the "multiple forces behind the dehumanisation" and exclusion of trans people in policy and institutions.[48] Through Mabenge's memoir, South African trans people have been provided with a guide on how to mediate the intersecting intricacies of the public health system and medical aid bureaucracy.

Tomson's memoir shares how she navigated the private South African health system in order to medically transition. In her consultations with private healthcare professionals, she notes that several doctors had their own, trans-averse beliefs, and that many "lacked empathy and understanding."[49] Yet, Tomson persisted, despite the pushback she received from her psychologist and endocrinologist. Bear in mind that Tomson is herself a medical professional, versed in the discourses and practices. Despite this knowledge repertoire, her memoir charts the challenges and frustrations and gaslighting she experienced, with her transness being discounted. The memoir also moves beyond her own experience of eventual successful transition, reaching towards a future in which Tomson wants to open a practice for trans people run by a qualified trans doctor. This practice would establish a "place where patients could receive holistic healthcare, where they'd be treated like human beings instead of lab results or clinical diagnosis" and without the fear of prejudice, discrimination and judgment; actively seeking to change the medical landscape through her actions.[50]

TRANS LIFE WRITING AS ACTIVISM

We can now begin to think through the potential for the strategies employed by Mabenge and Tomson as valuable and innovative means that unsettle and broaden the narrow codes of narration associated with transnormative life writing. In terms of our argument, this disruption can be thought of as activism in the service of trans lives, which demonstrates how trans people can reclaim their power and overcome the challenges they face. Importantly, the entrenched narrative tropes of trans becoming, as American speculative fiction writer Keffy Kehrly describes, "affect the ways others see" trans people, but they also influence how trans people "see themselves"; this can obscure and obfuscate their developing personal narratives along the ongoing route of transition, until they are able to break free from them.[51] Further, the established generalisations about what a trans life looks like and how it 'should' 'finally' emerge often bear minimal resemblance to the realities of most trans people and function to delimit, minimise and erase the intersectional challenges faced and decisions taken during the processual, often conflictual realities of trans becoming.[52]

Vakoch and Sharp observe several forms that enable trans life writers to resist harmful tropes—such as wrong body or dressing up as a woman—that have emerged from traditional and historical trans autobiography.[53] Examples include Munroe Bergdorf's *Transitional: In One Way or Another We All Transition* (2023)[54] and Raquel Willis' *The Risk it Takes to Bloom: On Life and Liberation* (2023).[55] While these are not South African examples, they do illustrate how trans activists have resisted and subverted tropes about trans people. This is a salient reminder that life writing can be envisaged

as inclusive and flexible, as both a genre and literary practice, allowing life writers to blur boundaries and transgress conventions, rather than simply reinforce expectations.[56]

Borrowing from this expansive conception of life writing, trans life writing, further extended to forms of lived account, storying and spoken narration more broadly, can enable trans authors to counter transnormative assumptions and conventionalised auto/biographical patterning and voicing. In relating aspects of their lived experience, trans people can adapt and expand the familiar scope of a life story's subject matter, but also the very conventions of what it means to narrate what is understood as a single coherent self in a life—since trans experience needs to make room for especially complex modes of selving, differing trans experiences and representational possibilities. Vakoch and Sharp observe that "by reclaiming" power, trans life writers and activists can offer a "critique of the narrow and oppressive" institutional practices that are derived from the gender binary, cisheteronormative ideologies and institutional practices and imposed onto trans people.[57] Through the nuanced re-storying of narratives of trans becoming, trans(itioning) trajectories and trans terminologies, trans people can create dialogic sites where they can reassess their connections and experiences to entrenched ideas about transness, regaining power over themselves, their identities and the patterns through which their lived experiences are brought into narrative.

Conventionally published South African trans life writing, scarce as it is, seems to favour a focus on the positively transformational power of trans existence and the triumphant, enduring self-determination required to overcome systemic barriers to access and personal circumstance. We suggest, however, that attention to a variety of less visible, more diverse and non-traditional trans experiences and subject matters is needed. Through such inclusion, a nascent field of South African trans life narration can create possibilities for recognising the complexity of trans identity that go beyond prescriptive definitions of trans/gender.[58] Camminga notes that incorporating "a multiplicity of experiences of gender," yielding stories that diverge from transnormativity and demonstrating "varying levels of scope for agency," enables trans people to tell their stories in expansive ways that can better capture their experience.[59] Alternative, non-traditional trans life stories can be political, but this is not a requirement. Positioning trans life narration as a form of activism enables us to complicate the preference for a narrowly political understanding of transness, instead including more subtle, ordinary life experiences. Our expansive approach unsettles an emphasis in which the urgent desire to counter trans invisibility and erasure unfortunately privileges a select few trans narratives that uphold prescriptive cis/gender norms and expectations of transness, while excluding trans narratives that transgress, deviate and do not conform.[60]

Trans life narration broadly understood as activism transforms the personal experiences of trans people into politically charged and moving life stories that have the potential to provoke change. By sharing their experiences, good and bad, of trauma and triumph, trans people recounting their life stories work in relation to rigid institutional systems and literary conventions, producing "hopeful narratives of enacting political agency" that contest stereotypes, discrimination, social marginalisation, institutional oppression and a lack of access.[61] Apart from recognising the potential to change subject, and subject matter, in telling their stories, trans people can potentially also change trans life writing itself, by highlighting in their narration different modes of (re)presenting their trans experiences. Vakoch and Sharp note that by looking at alternative modes of

"literary self-construction," we can locate trans life narratives within a broader history of activism within the country's transition from apartheid to a democracy.[62] Exploring trans life writing as activism enables us to "pursue a richer understanding of the diverse techniques of trans self-representation and theories of gendered selfhood alternative to mainstream narratives of trans identity."[63]

TRANS LIFE STORYING

In seeking other nodes of lived account beyond conventional memoir as activist trans disruption, we also turn to anecdotal stories and spoken accounts. These are not conventional life writing, per se. But such life storying, ephemerally encountered and shared in happenstance situations, if given the attention of public record, has the power to foster a powerful trans imaginary beyond society's more abstracted and disembodied misunderstandings of 'transness.' Our example, here, is the life story of Maria, who, having moved to Cape Town from a small town on the West Coast, recounted, to the first author of the present paper, her experiences of accessing hormones at Groote Schuur Hospital's (GSH) Transgender Clinic.

Maria, sharing her story conversationally, demonstrates her resilience as a trans person, determined to expose the challenges she faced, the prejudices present at satellite clinics and how she overcame them.[64] These clinics can themselves be seen as a form of activism, since, as part of public health outreach provision they are intended to bridge the health service gaps that persist in South Africa. However, Maria told of how she faced long waiting times, limited engagement with healthcare professionals, high fees and the social prejudice of being excluded from more privileged, regular trans groups by clinic sisters. Seeking alternative means to self-actualise and continue her medical transition, at the time of the conversation Maria was now a patient at Groote Schuur Hospital (GSH), sharing her story as a means to make known the systemic imbalances and power struggles that characterise even spaces specifically designed to cater for trans people. Maria's lived account suggests that, despite only sharing elements of life experiences through spoken account, rather than formally-published life writing, a trans person can engage in life storying, creating a personally memorable account of lived situations, challenges encountered and relations as characterised with other social protagonists and antagonists. The storying can reveal how the individual resists systemic stresses and demonstrates personal resilience, which can be demanded even within their own community and spaces created for them. By demanding and asserting her right to access treatment at GSH as a trans woman, after having come via the social and economic inequalities of the marginalised satellite clinic, both Maria's actions *and* her telling of aspects of her life story comprise personal modes of trans "expression, visibility and experimentation" within the limits of the system; they represent "agentic and enabling forms of activism" that could also empower other trans people to challenge and overcome adverse circumstances.[65] Maria's small story is an example of how a trans woman's recounting of her experience contests easy claims about socially-enabling gestures (such as the satellite clinic) that are supposed to be examples of activist outreach. In doing so, she revealed the varying textures, realities and developments of being trans in socially and politically challenging environments, and (with her permission) her experiences have gone on to be recorded in a PhD and in academic scholarship.

Another example of trans life narration that disrupts normative discourse and straddles traditional political activism and trans life narration is the work done by the trans community-building organisation, Sistaazhood, which advocates for the rights of "the most systematically erased and vulnerable transgender people"—those who are homeless and trans and sex workers in Cape Town.[66] Like the satellite clinic that Maria attended, this organisation was established to proactively respond to the "rigid legal frameworks" and transphobic attitudes that marginalise and render trans people invisible in society.[67] Important to our argument about life narration is that their work has been documented by theorists, scholars and journalists, and featured in local conferences held by NGOs such as Gender Dynamix. In other words, the work of an expressly political activist organisation is also imbricated in a range of efforts around storying trans lives as worthy of justice. Camminga and Matebeni, for example, in their scholarship, share the experiences of some of the trans refugee sex workers who are part of the Sistaazhood community.[68] As with Maria, informal conversation occurs, less as a fieldwork method than as human reciprocity, a hospitable, life-affirming space intended to counter more typically hostile responses to refugees, sex workers and trans people. In conversation with the authors Evelyn, an East African trans woman, recounts that the only way she could survive the difficult and expensive life in Cape Town was by becoming a sex worker and by sticking with Flavie, the other trans refugee in the group. Evelyn notes that "Flavie is a very close friend" and that "she has been there by [her] side through the difficulties of being a refugee, a transgender woman, and also selling sex."[69] Even here, the friendship and shared life knowledge exchanged between Flavie and Evelyn is a small form of lived activism that fosters trans solidarity, an "engagement that becomes even more urgent, during heightened" debilitating circumstances.[70] Further expanding the life narration element of Sistaazhood is a magazine special issue, specially designed for the organisation, titled "Sistaaz of the Castle," a documentary-type publication in which members of Sistaazhood voice their stories, aiming to bring awareness to their struggles as homeless sex workers in Cape Town. There exists both a print version of the magazine, and a digital version, which gives physical embodiment to the convention of quoted 'voice' in journalistic features. In the digital magazine, people can listen to the trans women describe their lives in their own words and voices; hearing about their dreams for the future, how they overcame personal challenges and started transitioning. The magazine profile of the group of transwomen affiliated to Sistaazhood illustrates how their everyday actions have influenced the course of their lived narratives, and evidences how the women have sought to recharacterise trans life and life narration by shifting public perception away from often negative reviews of transness. The women's openhearted intimate comments show alternative, unexpected outcomes for trans life, even punctuated by brief, ephemeral moments of creativity, innovation and joy.

In the Sistaazhood magazine, in a conversation with Mariam Bouteba, Netta Marcus explains that she founded the organisation by looking for other trans women like her and deciding one night to "invite the girls" to her place, where they "had a party" and shared stories, bonding to create a community that would enable them to face the issues of "stigma, alienation and the loss of family."[71] The Sistaazhood account is an example of how, against transphobic attitudes and policies as well as stigmatised social storying, trans people create affirming, dialogic spaces in which their lives can find valid expression through conversation, group solidarity and trans-relevant content.

By creating these spaces, they enable one another to speak about, actively engage with and inform themselves on trans issues that are otherwise negatively characterised.[72] Through community, the group creates opportunities for members to "generously share resources, advice and support, spanning the intersections of HIV, homelessness and the criminalisation of sex work."[73] Such conversations are significant modes of trans life narration because they enable them to intimately *trans* or move across the difficulties that shape their lives while prioritising trans self-understandings.[74] Such communal life storying spaces and conversations enable trans people to, as Jamaican feminist literary theorist Betty Wilson puts it, "lay critical groundwork for imagining alternative realities and worlds" that are not plagued by narratives of suffering, trauma, sexual violence and injustice.[75] Reiss and Sogunro note that an emphasis on "resilience and community building alongside critical analysis of violence, exclusion and marginalisation reflects a mature movement capable of holding complexity without sacrificing either intellectual honesty or political commitment," allowing the marginal, brief and complex life narratives of pilloried trans people to be voiced and visible.[76] These small examples demonstrate that trans people have, through intentionally wording their actions, aimed to bring awareness to the issues of a community that has repeatedly been sidelined and forgotten. In response to such erasure of their lived stories, trans people found alternative narrative modes, disrupting normative spaces through celebrating self-in-community and depending on one another.

Why is this acknowledgement of unusual, marginal forms of life narration important? Because depictions and interpretations of trans lives still tend not to find recognition in formal, conventional publishing. In other words, even the apparently minor recounting of trans life stories, such as the brief examples discussed in this paper that emerge enfolded in discursive sites such as scholarly articles, book chapters and research studies, comprises a fragile, innovatively unconventional archiving of trans lives that exist on the margins of society and are habitually overlooked and left unrecorded. Scholars' inquiries into trans lives (such as ours) work with trans people to present new insights on how activism comes into being, in the service of lives otherwise undone.

Beyond traditional publishing, there are also blogs[77] and unscripted and unedited YouTube videos[78] on trans lives in Cape Town that disseminate unfiltered stories about trans lives, offering Vakoch and Sharp's "fresh perspective on transness that disrupts the usual frameworks for understanding, debating and navigating transness in today's society."[79] Through these mediated sites, trans people are creatively able to 'author' and indeed find authorisation for their lives, reaching wider audiences and creating better conditions for trans lives and life stories to be seen and understood. Crucially, ignoring such informal trans life narrations would be to erase a variety of telling perspectives and beliefs, as well as emergent practices of trans life and modes of narration that might not previously have been addressed in the literatures of trans life and established autobiography. This is important, since examples such as social media posts which map individual transition journeys comprise life narration approaches that willingly engage with, and even document, the more difficult questions and material challenges of being trans, serving to remind us that, in the storying of transness, there is not a neat or comprehensive way to story the complex lived realities of being trans. These less formal accounts resist trans erasure by insisting on assertions of bodily visibility and change, as well as rationales for beliefs and the visibilising of difficulties and joy, illustrating the possible breadth of creating and narrating a life for trans others.

CONCLUSION

Trans life narration is a form of activism that works to change how trans people and trans issues are understood and engaged with in society. Present in different shapes and forms, in more traditional and less conventional publishing fora, trans life storying is particularly important because it (re)presents trans people with opportunities to imagine their lives anew, via both collective and individual approaches of living and narrating, to find solutions to the systemic and institutional challenges they face. This may seem old news in a country like South Africa which has a history of activism that includes the fight for equal rights and access, and protections for trans people, with NGOs taking centre stage in this liberation struggle. However, when we begin to see the connections between traditional activist agency, trans life writing and trans life narration understood more broadly, the potential to create a powerfully intersectional bloc of thought and action is strengthened, in the service of still marginalised trans lives. The trans memoirs of Mabenge and Tomson demonstrate that trans authors can both conform to reproducible narrative patterns that render them familiar to dominant understandings of transness, but at the same time deviate from these, actively disrupting the expectations, assumptions and established patterns preferred by traditional trans auto/biography. Additionally, turning to anecdotal, less conventional, informal forms of trans life storying and narrating enables us to initiate a scholarly approach that actively seeks new ways of affirming knowledge of transness and trans lives.

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