Rowan Dowling

Russian Trans* Stories: Collective Transgender Autobiography as Activism

This article explores contemporary transgender collective autobiography published by Vykhod (Coming Out), an LGBTQ+ activist initiative in Russia. It contributes to the growing literature on trans* issues in Russian Studies by bringing a range of trans* voices to the forefront of discussion, situating them within the Russian context, and bridging literary analysis with trans* life writing theory.

At the centre of this analysis are three collections featuring 'trans* stories': *We're Here: Collected Trans*Stories* [My zdes': Sbornik trans*istorii, 2017], *Who I Am: From Sex and Roles to Queer* [Kto ia est': Ot pola i roli k kvir, 2018], and *Everyone Has a Body* [Telo est' u vsekh, 2018]. These collections defy easy categorisation, combining autobiographical essays, poetry, diary extracts, art, and comic strips. The unifying factor is the first-person perspective, with authors drawing on their lived experiences as either trans* individuals or their loved ones.

The article determines the distinctive features of this 'trans* story' genre and demonstrates how Vykhod has mobilised autobiography in their trans* activism. It argues that rather than seeking to establish political visibility, activists are crowdsourcing trans* stories in attempts to create a sense of solidarity and community, achieve better trans* representation in LGBTQ+ projects, and provide a source of advice and self-help for Russian trans* readers facing similar issues.

Although the collections aim to generate the impression of 'unity' in these respects, the article equally illustrates that trans* stories are intended to showcase the diversity of trans* people and experiences. Narratives were intentionally curated to unsettle normative trans* life writing structures and work against the limitations placed on trans* bodies, sexualities, and gender expressions by the medical establishment. Specifically, Vykhod's trans* stories spotlight a remarkable spectrum of gender and sexual identities and are particularly concerned with how trans* and queer (*transkvir*) experiences can intersect. Tracing these *transkvir* themes and aesthetics, this article shows how Russian trans* life writers are employing innovative linguistic and stylistic strategies to address the failures of the identity paradigm, the Russian language, and normative discourses to articulate trans* subjectivity or gender ambiguity.

This article explores 'trans* stories' published by the LGBTQ+ initiative Vykhod [Coming Out] in Saint Petersburg, Russia. 'Trans*' operates as an umbrella term indicating a range of suf-

fixes that may follow (-*gender, -feminine, -masculine* etc.) while remaining inclusive of other non-normative gender identities such as non-binary, agender, bigender, demigender, genderqueer, and so on. Throughout, I use *they/them* pronouns to refer to non-binary speakers as it is uncertain which pronouns the subjects would self-identify with in English.

In the Russian Federation, President Vladimir Putin has mockingly called trans* people 'transformers' (Voronov et al. 2021: 7) and stated that teaching about gender fluidity is 'on the verge of a crime against humanity' (Sperling et al. 2022). State rhetoric, moreover, presents being LGBTQ+ as incompatible with Russianness (Essig et al. 2019). Gender studies research centres have been classed as 'foreign agents' (Rossman 2021) along with Russian LGBTQ+ activist groups including Vykhod. Furthermore, since Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, state rhetoric has crystalised anti-LGBTQ+ and anti-West sentiment by positioning Russia as defending 'traditional values' under assault. Trans* rights specifically have been derided in Russia's justifications for the war in Ukraine and its attempts to legitimise the crackdown on its own citizens. Putin

has claimed, for example, that Russian citizens who seek 'gender freedoms' are part of an anti-Russian 'fifth column' (Sperling et al. 2022).

Research into Russian trans* subjectivities is therefore increasingly urgent, yet calls for papers on queer topics rarely produce trans* proposals (Healey et al. 2021: 238–239). In fact, the initial call for this special issue resulted primarily in proposals about gay men, requiring the editor to seek additional contributions from scholars working on lesbian, bisexual, and trans* topics. As such, the existing pool of literature explicitly dealing with trans* people, history and representation in Russia is small and is only now emerging as a distinct field of study. Yana Kirey-Sitnikova is spearheading the effort, publishing a range of articles on Russian trans* feminism, trans* activisms, and linguistic strategies for gender neutralisation (Kirey-Sitnikova 2016, 2020, and 2021). Studies of trans* figures in other historical periods are materialising too, such as the article by Margarita Vaysman in this issue, and trans* readings of Medieval and Early Modern hagiography (Mayhew forthcoming). However, much research remains to be conducted and prior studies would benefit from being re-

examined with an eye to trans* subjectivity (Healey et al. 2021: 239).

The present article contributes to this growing body of research by surveying the 'trans* stories' published by Vykhod and amplifying trans* voices. The article has the following structure. First, I introduce my three primary sources and draw out distinctions between their content and style. I then offer a definition of 'trans* stories' in relation to auto/biography theory (Smith et al. 2010; Poletti 2020), trans* life writing studies (Drabinski 2014; Halberstam 2005; Jacques 2017; Prosser 1998; Rondot 2016; Vipond 2018), and the editorial framing of the publications themselves. Specifically, I argue that trans* stories can be described as a form of collective autobiography consisting of crowdsourced life narratives across a range of media. Crucially, the stories are produced by trans* people, for trans* people (or an otherwise queer audience). I show that this type of cultural activism does not aim for political visibility. Rather, I argue that mobilising trans* autobiography is intended to provide a source of self-help and achieve two competing aims: fostering a sense of solidarity and community, and highlighting the idiosyncratic nature of

trans* experiences. Finally, I demonstrate how this intention to showcase unity and diversity plays out across the collated trans* stories through analysis of how trans* stories represent the complex intersections between trans* and queer (*transkvir*) experiences in three respects: identity labels, the failures of gendered language, and sex and the body.

A Trans* Archive

Three sources published by the LGBTQ+ initiative Vykhod, founded in Saint Petersburg in 2008, form the foundation of my analysis. PDFs of these books are made freely available through the website (Vykhod n.d.a.). The publications have also been distributed in print, such as at the annual QueerFest event run by Vykhod since 2009. The initiative's Trans*Mission, launched in 2015, runs peer counselling sessions, arranges legal consultations, provides training on trans* inclusivity, and publishes materials on trans* topics (Vykhod 2018; Vykhod n.d.b).

The first publication is *We're Here: A Collection of Trans*Stories* (Dzhibladze et al. 2017). The 200-page book, as the title suggests, is entirely focused on lived trans* experience and

contains almost 50 contributions with a first-person perspective, including poetry, art, diary extracts, essays, and comic strips. Most contributors do not disclose their location, but those who do indicate significant geographical diversity, writing not only from Saint Petersburg and Moscow, but Rostov-on-Don, Omsk, Kyrgyzstan, the US, and Ukraine. As *We're Here* is the largest collection and is solely focused on trans* lives, I draw most extensively from this publication in the article.

The other two collections I examine do not include trans* content exclusively, but rather capture a spectrum of LGBTQ+ life writing about gender and sexual identities. In this article, however, I refer only to the stories written by self-identifying trans* subjects. *Everyone Has a Body* (Cherchenko et al. 2018), is a 46-page illustrated zine containing often experimental life writing centred around LGBTQ+ people's self-perception of embodied experiences such as menstruation, sex lives, BDSM culture, body weight, and performance art. Three stories explore experiences specifically connected to having a trans* body. *Who I Am: From Sex and Roles to Queer* (Sabunaeva 2018), is a 32-page zine which introduces a queer-theoretical

framework alongside seven short autobiographical stories, four of which articulate trans* subjectivities. The editor, Maria Sabunaeva, explains that the purpose of the zine is to explore the categories with which we define ourselves and others define us. Contributors, who each have differently intersecting sexual and gender identities, were asked to write stories about how they identify, what the label(s) they use mean to them, and how they came to identify this way.

Despite the range of identities featured across these collections, Vykhod's autobiographical archive falls somewhat short in one respect. Transwomen and transfeminine people are very underrepresented. Most non-binary contributors across the texts were also assigned female at birth (AFAB). Given the feeling of being threatened—or the examples of real violence committed against them—related by the trans* women who decided to contribute, it seems that the lack of subjects assigned male at birth (AMAB) likely results from the pervasive climate of homophobic violence in Russia. Trans* people may additionally be read as gay or lesbian due to a widespread belief in the 'gender inversion' of homosexuals (Baer 2013: 40). This violence especially targets AMAB people

whose gender expression is seen as transgressing hegemonic masculinity.

Indeed, in *We're Here,* the picture painted in stories by trans-women and their loved ones is relatively bleak. Iana Sitnikova explains that she no longer believes being attacked will draw media attention or public sympathy—and the constant threat has led her to become somewhat disillusioned with trans* activism and the idea of a bright future. A post-script reveals her concern about contributing to the collection, 'knowing that someone somewhere will use this text against me' (Dzhibladze et al. 2017: 131). Zhanna echoes such fears, feeling she lives 'as if in an enemy camp' and needs to self-censor her behaviour, appearance, and thoughts because she cannot safely come out to anyone (Dzhibladze et al. 2017: 192). She doubts anyone would be ready 'to carry the weight of this responsibility' if she did come out because it would be 'easier to betray the man and enjoy the spectacle of his execution' (Dzhibladze et al. 2017: 193). Unfortunately, these threats are real. Inessa Gashinskaia's story is written in memory of trans* friend Anzhela Likina, who was tragically murdered in Ufa by the boyfriend of her ex-wife after a leaked traffic police dashcam video of Anzhela's documents being inspected went viral (Dzhibladze et al. 2017: 147). Together, the threats these writers relate suggest that even in an anonymised forum, the potential repercussions are perhaps too much to risk for many AMAB trans* people.

This level of hostility makes the work initiatives such as Vykhod are conducting by sharing trans* stories all the more important. Indeed, Vykhod's mission reflects a broader trend among Russian LGBTQ+ initiatives. T-Deistvie [T-Action] ran a 'TransStory' project online (T-Deistvie 2021), although their social media accounts have sadly been made private following the expansion of the anti-"gay propaganda" law in November 2022. The Arkhangel'sk LGBTQ+ community centre Rakurs published a book in which trans* individuals used their life experiences to answer frequently asked questions from other trans* people (Ford et al. 2020). *Kvir' Sibir'* (2020), which includes trans* life narratives, was published by a Siberian queer feminist collective. T-Deistvie also published *Good Questions* (Grin 2019), developed from a series of workshops to promote the practice of autobiographical writing as therapeutic self-help.

Evidently, there is a widespread interest among Russian activists in ensuring trans* (and queer) people are given a platform for self-expression and self-exploration. As Dzhonni Dzhibladze, one of the four trans* editors of *We're Here,* explains: 'Doctors write about us (and more often not about us, but our 'pathology'). [...] Journalists [...] Lawyers [...] They write about us in the third person. I think it's time for us to write our own story – to write it in the first person' (Dzhibladze et al. 2017: 7).

Defining 'Trans* Stories'

The term 'trans* stories' is taken from the subtitle of *We're Here.* I adopt the term here in a specific sense, to refer to a form of collective autobiography consisting of short, crowdsourced life narratives, created across a range of media by trans* people, for trans* people. First, these stories are crowdsourced in that they are submitted by trans* people (and their loved ones) in response to a private or open call by an LGBTQ+ activist group (e.g. Vykhod 2021; T-Deistvie 2021). Second, the multimedia approach expands autobiographical acts beyond the written word and makes 'life narra-

tives' a more apt term (Smith et al. 2010: 4). Third, trans* stories are consistently very short regardless of the choice of media. Comic strips include only a few frames, poetry rarely runs longer than a page, self-portraits are single images, and the longest written texts average at less than ten pages. Therefore, instead of focusing strictly on the 'I'—a singular person and their experience—trans* stories, like crowdsourced autobiography more generally, spotlight collective experience among like-minded strangers (Poletti 2020: 84). This kind of collective autobiography invites readers to relate what they read to their own experience, thus directly contributing to the activist goal of further expanding and reinforcing community ties through literary peer support, as I outline below.

Mark Kandol'skii, another editor of *We're Here,* held competing aims for his work on the collection:

> I would also like to mention what I call the 'trans-narrative' [trans-narrativom]. It is a generic narrative [povestvovanie] transgender people typically tell about themselves. [...] As the editor of the collection I wanted to

widen this story and show a variety of situations. Alongside this, I wanted all [the trans*stories] to flow into a single utterance, so that not only the individual voice of each author but the collective words of the Russophone trans*community could be heard as well (Dzhibladze et al. 2017: 7-8).

While Kandol'skii's two aims of unifying and diversifying trans* voices may at first appear incompatible, readers are consistently reminded of the idiosyncrasies of trans* lives. Trans* authors in *We're Here* (and the other two collections) bring new, various perspectives, determined by specific factors such as geographical location, age, and gender and sexual identity. However, common themes connect many stories, such as a rejection of simplistic identity labels, an explicit discussion of (queer) sexuality, and a desire to queer language to combat the gendered 'I'. Moreover, the term 'trans* stories' itself, in addition to the titles of two of Vykhod's collections, suggest a united voice: <u>*We're Here*</u> and <u>*Everyone Has a Body*</u> [emphasis mine].
The curated voices therefore each highlight the individualised nature of trans* experiences

while working together to challenge the dominant tropes of the 'trans-narrative'. With this term, Kandol'skii designates a well-documented narrative structure that trans* people have been compelled to use by cisgender gatekeepers. This narrative arc centres around a binary transition either from female-to-male (FTM) or, more often, male-to-female (MTF), in a three-act trajectory: a gender-dysphoric childhood; a transformation in the big city; and the aftermath of the 'sex change' (Rondot 2016: 531–532, citing Ames 2005). Trans* life writers following this formula employed normative terms and rhetorical devices, such as the idea of being 'born in the wrong body', which would be intelligible to medical professionals (Drabinski 2014: 309; Vipond 2019: 19–20). Deviation from this model could prevent the person from accessing therapy and surgery, and would act as a barrier to publication in spaces run by cisgender editors (Jacques 2017: 360, 366–367).
While this summary of the trans-narrative derives from Western trans* life writing theory and transition memoirs, similar trends can be observed in Russia. Contemporary Russian medical theories of 'transsexualism' have developed in conversation with English-language clini-

cal literature since the late Soviet period (Kirey-Sitnikova 2020). Russian psychiatry still classifies 'transsexualism' as a mental illness, overlapping with 'disorders of sexual preference' including sadomasochism, paedophilia, and exhibitionism (Weaver 2020: 115). When these collections were written, in order to be prescribed hormone treatment, trans* people in Russia were first required to receive a diagnosis, a certificate recommending medical intervention, and a referral for examination (Wonderzine 2019). This process typically required observation in a psychiatric ward for at least one month. To change legal gender, a committee composed of a sexologist, psychiatrist and a psychologist first needed to issue a Certificate of Sex Reassignment (Wonderzine 2019).

Trans* people in Russia who were able to undergo a medical transition before the legislative changes therefore experienced pressure to recount a normative autobiography to clinicians similar to that which led to the emergence of the dominant narrative model in the West. By contrast, Vykhod's publications are edited by trans* and queer activists who expressly sought trans* stories diverging from this mould.

Mobilising Autobiography

In this section, I argue that sharing trans* stories was becoming increasingly instrumental to the work of trans* activists in Russia. Given that trans* and queer voices are effectively silenced in the public sphere under Russia's infamous 'gay propaganda' laws of 2013 and 2022, the act of representation may be considered activism in and of itself (Andreevskikh 2018: 14). By tying representations to real (though often anonymised) LGBTQ+ Russian speakers, Vykhod's practice of sharing trans* (and queer) autobiography opposes state-sponsored discourses which position Russia as a defender of 'traditional values' against a Western threat of sexual and gender transgression (Essig et al. 2019; Sperling et al. 2022). Self-representation thus becomes a powerful tool for documenting the existence (and creativity) of people otherwise erased from the media and society.

Such projects may be classed as a type of Russian trans* cultural activism, which has been characterised as influenced by the Western LGBTQ+ activist goals of emphasising 'diversity' and 'community' (Kirey-Sitnikova 2020). While the goals ex-

pressed above reflect this influence, I contend that Vykhod's trans* stories are significant in the landscape of Russian publishing because they provide a platform for discussing the specific issues trans* people face in Russia. These issues include the impact of state-sponsored homophobia and transphobia, the pathologizing structure of the Russian medical establishment, and difficulty articulating trans* subjectivity in the Russian language.

For instance, some trans* stories demonstrate that due to the homophobic climate, authors come under increased pressure when making decisions about surgery and 'passing'. A pessimistic mood pervades these texts. A recent report by Vykhod demonstrated the dangers of being outed, blackmailed, or otherwise subjected to abuse on the grounds of gender and sexual identity, with trans* people in the most vulnerable position due to these compounding factors (Voronov et al. 2021: 51). Anastasia, for instance, dreads how medical staff will react to her body if she is suddenly hospitalised and is considering having vaginoplasty solely for that reason (Cherchenko et al. 2018: 43). Other writers suggest 'passing' is not necessarily desirable because it may increase the risk

of violence. Maks Nebel had been living 'stealth'—meaning he had cut all past ties in order to live without anyone knowing he had transitioned—but after the implementation of the 'gay propaganda' law in 2013, he reconsidered his position: 'Life started winking at me from all sides: 'You're stealth ['Ty v stellze']? That won't save you.' I came to the conclusion that the deeper stealth is, the higher the risk of being outed, the more painful it will be, and the more vulnerable I myself will be' (Dzhibladze et al. 2017: 48–49).

Another key point of departure from Western activist goals is that Vykhod's autobiographical strategy does not necessarily aim for public visibility and recognition. Rather, its primary aim appears to be establishing a semi-anonymised literary support network for trans* (and queer) Russian speakers who may see themselves reflected in the autobiographies of others. The argument I make here draws on research demonstrating that Russian LGBTQ+ community-building and spaces appropriation are usually overlooked by Western media and academic literature due to the dominance of the Western visibility paradigm (Buyantueva and Shevtsova 2020: 9). The applicability of this paradigm is questionable

in post-Soviet contexts (Baer 2013: 38–39; Healey and Stella 2021: 233). Many Russian trans* people believe that increased visibility will result in more hatred and violence (Kirey-Sitnikova 2020). Essentially, '[t]o the Western public and allies, visibility for LGBTQ+ Russians is the political visibility juxtaposed against the Russian government. However, that is not necessarily the visibility that local LGBTQ+ people desire for themselves' (Buyantueva and Shevtsova 2020: 9).

The kind of 'visibility' that trans* stories projects seek to achieve, then, is concentrated within the trans* and LGBTQ+ community itself. Vykhod uses collections of autobiographical work to spotlight trans* experiences for trans* readers (and queer allies), with the primary objective being to provide a means for self-help (cf. Prosser 1998: 125). As Di, who at the time of writing identified as queer/gender-questioning, explains:

> The people around us are an inexhaustible source of ideas, inspiration, and thoughts. […] At first, the idea that you are important, that your feelings are important, that you don't have to suffer and surmount it all, can seem strange. But if you properly think about it and reflect, it will eventually take root and get easier. Honestly. I promise (Dzhibladze et al. 2017: 112).

Adopting the second person here to directly address the imagined reader, Di links the act of listening to other people's experiences to self-reflection. Their 'promise' that these two interrelated practices will benefit your mental health and sense of self-worth, of course, implies the belief that their own story can improve the life of another trans* person.

While Russian trans* cultural activism has been criticised for producing overly abstract and theoretical texts informed by Western ideas without consideration for local conditions (Kirey-Sitnikova 2020), these life writing projects appear to have been well received. Three years after the publication of *We're Here,* Vykhod reported it was still sent personal messages attesting to how meaningful the collection had been to trans* readers and was planning another publication as a result (Vykhod 2021).

Transkvir Voices

Trans* bodies are sites forgotten in the construction of human sexuality because sexual categories are limited to body configurations: the underlying principle that body-equals-sex-equals-gender establishes the heterosexual/homosexual binary and leaves out the dynamics of trans* subjectivity (Cromwell 2006: 509). For instance, nonbinary people (and their partners) struggle to negotiate the language around sexual behaviour and romantic relationships because sexual categories emerged from binary understandings of the gendered body towards which desire is directed (Cordoba 2020; Stryker 2017: 33). In this section, I illustrate how trans* stories reify a diverse spectrum of queer sexualities overlapping with a spectral understanding of trans* experience.

First, I note that the prominence of the *transkvir* [transqueer] throughout the collections is a relatively striking feature, though is also, of course, not entirely unique in the landscape of trans* life writing worldwide (see for example, Drabinski 2014: 325; Jacques 2017: 360). Clinical literature ascribed a very limited form of heterosexuality to trans* subjects, reporting that trans* people were cut off from genital contact and would reject homo-

sexuality because announcing a preference for same-sexed bodies would threaten their body image (Cromwell 2006: 516). Some trans* people denied their sexuality when presenting themselves to practitioners, intentionally fulfilling expected stereotypes to ensure access to the services (Cromwell 2006: 511). This obfuscation of queer trans* subjectivities was perhaps a tactic to normalise transness through realigning it with heterosexuality, but one which led to transness and queerness remaining incompatible in the public imaginary (Vipond 2019: 30).

The array of sexualities represented across the trans* stories I have studied can be partly attributed to the fact that Vykhod focuses broadly on LGBTQ+ issues, so even those subjects who responded specifically to the call for *We're Here*, a trans*-focused project, were perhaps still more likely to be queer in addition to trans*. The intention to distribute the books at QueerFest may also have affected the selection of submitted materials. The fact the editors were a team of trans* people will also have impacted the ability to self-represent a *transkvir* subjectivity: 'So long as medico-psychological practitioners control the discourses about transsubjectivity, and as

long as transsexuals remain complicit, the binaries remain seemingly intact. Once trans-people begin articulating their own transsubjectivities, however, new discourse, and thus the expansion of binaries, can begin' (Cromwell 2006: 519).

Transkvir subjects in these collections counter these discourses by showing that sexual and gender identity is fluid and varies in significance to an individual over their lifetime. For instance, Kris in *Who I Am* questions the identity paradigm:

> And who am I now? Bisexual? Lesbian? Pansexual? A woman? Queer? Agender? Bigender? Well, at the very least, I know for a fact that I'm a feminist. If only that were enough. But I think the search for an identity can last forever, simply because the way a person is constructed is more complicated than their attempts to explain themselves (Sabunaeva 2018: 30).

Of course, Kris's repetition of the question mark after each term shows that none fits. Labels are too simplistic because they freeze the subject in a moment and do not reflect the per-petual search for identity over the life course.

Identity, I argue, is therefore itself shown to be in a perpetual state of transition by *transkvir* subjects. Sasha Dvanova, another contributor to *Who I Am*, likewise fluctuates between different labels throughout their text. However, they make their identifications undergo an additional, translingual transformation (Sabunaeva 2018: 23–24). Sasha first claims the label 'demi-female person' in English. The label then evolves into 'demi-femme' (in English), '"half"-woman' ["polu"-zhenshchina], 'half-faced' [polovinchatyi], 'non-binary' [nebinarnost'], and 'demi-feminine' [demi-feminnyi], where 'demi' is written in English and 'feminine' in Cyrillic. Sasha thus translates labels into and out of Russian, combining the languages in the final case to situate their identity on the border between binary modes (Russian or English). In addition to highlighting fluctuating identifications, these translingual terms signal a lack of native Russian expressions for gender fluidity. Indeed, Russian has no native term for 'gender' (the word *gender* is loaned from English) and instead uses *pol* (sex)—other trans* terminology is similarly borrowed (Kirey-Sitnikova 2020,

2021). Trans* Russian speakers are therefore incentivised to creatively queer their language to articulate their subjectivity, as I investigate further in the next sections.

In *We're Here,* 41-year-old Egor Gor recounts the changing identifications he had over his lifetime in detail. It is from his story that I adopt the term *transkvir*: 'I am a transgender man, but I prefer to call myself 'transqueer' [transkvir] because I have no desire to fit into the social model of a 'real man' that is being worked out everywhere all the time' (Dzhibladze et al. 2017: 178). Here, Egor uses the term *transkvir* in opposition to hegemonic masculinity. Yet the term additionally makes explicit the links between his trans* subjectivity, fluid sexuality, and his specific experiences navigating lesbian and gay communities.

Egor continually de/re/constructs his identity throughout his narrative. The terms he uses—'transgender man', 'transqueer', 'gay', 'girl', 'lesbian', 'transsexual', 'guy', 'bisexual'—are transient, but he shows that the ways in which trans* and queer experiences have informed his sense of self are inseparable. For instance, he was driven toward the lesbian community because others applied this label to him and alt-

hough he had heard of being 'transgender', an article he read when he was sixteen had scared him by stating that 'transsexualism' was an illness and taking hormones would lead to death within three years. Therefore, although he identifies as a lesbian for three years, he does not do so 'thoroughly and firmly' but because it is 'convenient and comfortable' (Dzhibladze et al. 2017: 180–181).

Following decades failing to find 'firm' language to convey his trans* identity, and after a break-up that, he explains, led to clinical depression, Egor locates another means of self-expression:

> My first step towards recovery was unusual: I decided that because my 'male side' was so sore on the inside, I needed to externalize it—pull it out into a visual field. So I pulled it out—I ran a blog on LiveJournal, which at that point was enjoying considerable popularity. I ran the blog as a guy under the name Egor and wrote short, pithy phrases. Honest ones. Reflecting myself. I posted pictures, poetry... Imagined that Egor lived in Amsterdam (I'd always dreamed of going there).

That he was bisexual. Basically, I took Egor and pulled him out from inside myself. And I have to say that I still like that Egor a hell of a lot, even though he isn't totally like who I am today (Dzhibladze et al. 2017: 181).

By creating a bisexual male online persona, Egor addresses the deficit of language and depicts a more 'honest' version of himself. He thus writes himself into existence not through a medico-discursive narrative (cf. Prosser 1998: 9), but through an alternate fictional framework of his own making. Of course, it is important to note that the repeated verb 'pull out' [vytashchit'] to describe the externalisation of the truer self—'Egor', who is described as sorely trapped inside the body—follows the 'trans-narrative' to some extent. However, in that model, medical intervention liberates the self from its confines. Here, by contrast, the act of writing a blog enables Egor to project a *transkvir* self into the digital space. This digital self may be conceptualised as at once embodied and mediated (Hartblay and Klepikova 2021: 1), in this case also through a fictional frame. Furthermore, by explicitly tying his autofictional

writing process to 'recovery', Egor's story indicates that autobiographical acts, when not inhibited by cisgender gatekeeping, exhibit self-help potential (as Di likewise suggested above). Indeed, many trans* stories recall how beneficial it was to re-imagine (and re-write) fictional characters through their own trans* subjectivity. Similarly to Egor, Alek Kit created fictional digital personas to express a seemingly truer mediated self. Their narrative traces the history of their identity through their past nicknames and online usernames, inspired by *Harry Potter, Star Trek,* dragons and anime (Dzhibladze et al. 2017: 140–141). Even when characters were not intentionally written as trans*, interpreting them as trans* felt empowering. Dasha Che describes themself as part Cheburashka, a popular Soviet children's television character and animal unknown to science, part Little Prince, the young alien protagonist of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's much-loved children's book, and an undefined 'creature' written in English (Dzhibladze et al. 2017: 174). Diana laments that trans* people are not represented in 'ordinary' media and only shown in 'special' narratives about transition and discrimination, but emphasises that the X-Men

helped her be proud of standing out rather than 'getting lost in the crowd' (Dzhibladze et al. 2017: 119–120). Kapitan Sliva likewise structures their story entirely around characters that helped them work through their non-binary identity (Dzhibladze et al. 2017: 116–118).

Together, these writers express the belief that finding yourself reflected in literature can improve your life, mental health, and self-understanding. Yet they are also predicated on the idea that through creativity and the blending of another assumed binary—fiction and reality—trans* and queer mediated selves may take shape. This use of international fiction ultimately speaks, once again, to the insufficiencies of (often loaned) rigid identity terms. Where labels fall short, identifying instead with fictional characters—including fictional personas—overcomes linguistic limitations.

The Gendered 'I'

Trans* writers also express frustration at the fact that languages such as Russian fail to account for trans* subjectivity because first-person speech is grammatically gendered. This necessitates that trans* speakers take a stance on how to gender their 'I'.

The decision about which grammatical agreements to adopt consequently impacts the safety of trans* subjects—speaking in a way others do not expect might out oneself as trans*. As Mira Tai explains in *Everyone Has a Body*, 'my "I" sounds like "he" to them. Yet really, they want to hear "she"' (Cherchenko et al. 2018: 5).

While many non-binary authors in these texts simply opt for either masculine or feminine endings, others experiment with innovative means of gender-neutral self-narration. For instance, Zhe Ostrov, who confides they would usually just use the masculine in day-to-day speech, implements the strategy of gender gaps in their writing and remarks they did not feel any 'internal contradictions' doing so (Dzhibladze et al. 2017: 146). Gender-gapping in Russian involves placing an underscore between the longest possible substring shared by the masculine and feminine modes and the verb's feminine ending (Kirey-Sitnikova 2021: 149). This gap is intended to highlight the insufficiency of the language to capture gender ambiguity or non-binary subjectivity.

> I'm a trans* person, now 23 years old. [...] For a long time, I defined myself

['opredelial_a sebia'] as a trans* man, considering my trans*genderness a terrible curse that would never allow me to live life. With time, with experience of activist work (which I by no means came to ['prish_la'] straight away), and by delving into gender theory, my identity transformed. [...] gradually becoming free, I left gender behind ['ia vysh_la iz gendernosti']. Now I feel there's no space for gender or gender identity inside me (Dzhibladze et al. 2017: 144).

Zhe's use of gender gaps literally and visually underscores a possibility in-between the verb's masculine/feminine binary modes. They thus break open the verb to forge a space for the ungendered, bigendered, gender fluid etc. Yet Zhe does not position themself in this gap per se—rather, they use it to gesture beyond the system altogether, claiming they feel no space for gender anymore.

Other trans* writers circumvent restrictive grammar and queer the Russian language through different methods. Agender Natasha avoids referring to themself in the past tense throughout

their text (Dzhibladze et al. 2017: 18). Dasha Che, writing from California, pointedly alternates between feminine, masculine, and neuter endings, missing the ambiguity afforded by *they*/*them* pronouns in English: 'I regularly disappeared [ischezla] from my body'; 'I got seriously involved [ia ser'ezno zanialsia] with dance and theatre'; 'into which I grew [vyroslo] and transformed [prevratilos']' (Dzhibladze et al. 2017: 173–177). Zhenia writes the majority of their sentences in gender-neutral passive constructions with 'me' as the object, or with another noun phrase like 'my body' or 'my experience' as the subject (Sabunaeva 2018: 31). The two exceptions are when they recall a time they believed they were a man and accordingly use a masculine ending [schital] (Sabunaeva 2018: 31), and another instance where they write in the future and alternate between masculine and feminine adjectival agreements [chutkim; otkrytoi i iskrennei] (Sabunaeva 2018: 32).

Prevailing transphobic and homophobic societal attitudes compel trans* people and their loved ones to use language with caution—firm belief in the gender inversion of gay men and lesbian women leads trans* subjects to receive homophobic abuse regardless of their sexuali-

ty. Anastasia, for instance, was subjected to homophobic slurs and needed to self-censor her appearance to keep safe:

> As soon as school stopped, I stopped holding myself back. I grew out my hair, tried hairstyles I liked. [...] I had long nails, a fringe and the thin eyebrows fashionable back then. I obviously didn't fit in. Some took it to mean one thing and simply said: 'You're a fag!' Can you expect anything else from them? // I had to find compromises on clothing. I couldn't allow myself much, I didn't want to encounter aggression, but it really weighed me down (Cherchenko et al. 2018: 39–40).

Inversely, some people may be generally accepting of homo-/bisexuality, but not of transgender identities, requiring *transkvir* individuals to manage aspects of their identity differently across various social channels (Voronov et al. 2021: 13–14). Lena, for example, has learnt to 'convey practically any information and express my thoughts through gender-neutral formulations' when discussing her genderqueer partner to protect herself and them from aggression and invasive questions (Dzhibladze et al. 2017: 23).

Such trans* experiences of homophobia are satirised in a comic by Hagra (Dzhibladze et al. 2017: 63). In the first of the two contrasting encounters he presents, Hagra is misgendered by a cashier wishing him a good day. This suddenly deflates his mood and sends him into a spiral of suicidal ideation. The second scene depicts him walking down the street, linking arms with his boyfriend. Their romantic stroll is disturbed by someone shouting 'fags!' [pediki!] from the window of a nearby block of flats. In response, the protagonist blushes, grins, and brings his arms close to his body in an excited pose: he 'passed' as male. His partner, meanwhile, is unamused. Obviously, the joke here is predicated on the unintended consequences of strangers' actions. The cashier wished him well but was insensitive to his gender expression, while the man insulting him inadvertently affirmed his gender identity. The implication is that the public are ignorant of trans* issues to the point that all *transkvirs* can do is laugh about it and try to take homophobia in stride.

Some approaches to suppressing gendered language described above may at first seem to lose

the agency of self-narration, such as by limiting the active voice. Yet this rejection of grammar requires creativity and autonomy, shaping otherwise exclusive language to reflect self-identification. It is important to note that this linguistic phenomenon is not unique to these texts but is rather a strategy being adopted by the wider Russian-speaking trans* community, and indeed in other gendered languages (Kirey-Sitnikova 2021). Although it may seem restrictive to self-expression, creatively circumventing these grammatical restraints constitutes a deliberate act of resistance and exposure which can be interpreted as a position of strength rather than victimhood—a position of 'queer vulnerability' (Utkin 2021: 78). Trans* speakers are (re)claiming Russian grammar on their own terms.

Sex and the Body

Medicalised discourses have denied trans* people physical sexuality by asserting that trans* people are devoid of sexual pleasure due to deep disgust of their sex organs (Cromwell 2006: 510). Trans* autobiographers have likewise often avoided discussing sexual en-

counters, especially the specifics of those before gender-affirming surgery (Cromwell 2006: 515). In addition to fulfilling the expectation of dysphoria needed to access treatments, evading sexual details in self-narratives has a protective purpose. Speaking explicitly about sex would 're-quire talking extensively about [the] body' and genitalia, 'running the risk of [...] undermining the identity carefully set up in [the] text, and in [...] life' (Jacques 2017: 368). Some trans* life writers circumvent the issue by resisting locating sexual attraction in 'gendered aspects of the body' and pinpointing it elsewhere in the body instead (Drabinski 2014: 323).

In Vykhod's trans* stories, many authors reclaim the physical sexuality and bodily ambiguity which has been denied them by clinical literature, practitioners, and the ubiquitous 'trans-narrative'. Such continued impact of the medical establishment on trans* people's sexual self-expression is evidenced, for instance, when Tangarr from Ukraine states he needed to mask the fact that 'I even really love vaginal sex' from doctors who assumed he would hate his body because he is trans* (Dzhibladze et al. 2017: 157).

One trans* story which depicts sexuality in explicit detail is an-

other hand-drawn comic by Hagra in which he represents himself giving anal sex to his boyfriend (Dzhibladze et al. 2017: 62). At first, he is enthusiastic and does so orally until his partner is ready for him to insert something. In the next panel, Hagra excitedly holds up a dildo, his glee punctuated by a classic comic book graphic of a pointy yellow explosion. However, Hagra suddenly pauses and begins to cry due to dysphoria ('I DON'T HAVE A DICKKK!'). In the final frame, his partner holds and comforts him ('Sh, shh… Everything will be okay! You're good even without a dick!') while in the background, Hagra's post-script in turn reassures the reader: 'P.S. It doesn't always happen like this. More often, I fuck normally and don't start weeping halfway through'.

In the comic, then, Hagra highlights that while dysphoria can sometimes affect his sex life, it does not prohibit him from enjoying sex or having sex 'normally' most of the time. Moreover, by drawing attention to the use of a sex toy, as well as by opting to depict himself shirtless with his breasts visible, Hagra does not omit gendered aspects of the body for fear of being unambiguously read as female (cf. Jacques 2017: 368). Rather, the message he conveys is that being

a man is not predicated on having certain genitalia or surgery, that you can still be in a 'same-sex' relationship before or without medically transitioning, and that the support of an understanding partner is invaluable.

Indeed, ambiguity and ambivalence have too often been denied in dominant visual depictions of trans* subjects who are 'rendered transsexual in the flesh' by their biographers (Halberstam 2005: 50–51, 97). In self-depictions, however, trans* subjects may acknowledge the ambiguities of trans* embodiment and resist the demands to separate their lives and bodies pre- and post-transition. They may instead elect to 'narrate continuous subjects' (Rondot 2016: 527) or otherwise confuse the 'direction' of transition and its associated gender performance. Some trans* stories writers achieve this type of narration by refusing to disconnect their current identity from their past body and previous gendered socialisation. As Sasha Dvanova explains, 'female experience – emotional, physical, social – is the foundation of my "I" [...] despite the realisation of my non-binaryness, under no circumstances would I want to divide my life into a "before" and an "after", drawing up a border' (Sabunaeva 2018: 23–24).

One instance where a trans* subject claims ambiguity is the striking self-portrait of Karl Martin (known by the username 'umba/умба') (Dzhibladze et al. 2017: 61). In the image, he confidently occupies a space in-between apparently binary opposites: gender attributes (masculine and feminine), sensations (serenity and pain), colours (black and white), and roles (subject and spectator). First, Martin incorporates a mix of gendered characteristics into his image, circumventing the pressure to conform to hegemonic masculinity. He frames his face with long flowing hair and a crown of old-fashioned syringes, where the rings at the top resemble the female sign. His beard flows in an imagined breeze along with his hair. His nails are painted black, and he wears a large teardrop-shaped earring. Second, there are signs he is simultaneously experiencing a moment of both pain and calm. His nipples are bleeding—perhaps suggestive of top surgery, but without specific scarring—and the dripping blood guides the viewer's gaze toward the cloth falling from his hips. His muscled arms are held in a stretch close to his curving body, as if he just woke up. That contradictory state of embodied feelings, a relaxed (even seduc-

tive) pose but the implication of pain, perhaps reflects how painful procedures in gender-affirming surgery can bring peace (a theme Martin returns to, along with his changing relationship to masculinity, in comics he also contributed (Dzhibladze et al. 2017: 123–126)). Meanwhile, his naked body divides the background into two halves, one black and one white. Situated between the block colours, Martin depicts himself staring back at the imagined viewer. He thus compresses the relative positions of the artist, subject, and spectator and shows himself fulfilling all these roles at once. The overall result is a figure refusing to allow himself or his body to be confined by the expected behaviours of the binary frameworks which organise the world.

Conclusions

This article has shown that trans* stories were expressly curated to counter the 'trans-narrative', a normative narrative structure for trans* autobiography which partially emerged from, and was still built into, official medical transition processes. Not all subversion of the trans-narrative is positive or affirming, but in this case, rather

points to barriers accessing treatments, documentation, or a continued sense of danger after medical transition and 'passing'. That being said, it is the collective nature of the publications which first and foremost subverts the monolithic trans-narrative (Jacques 2017: 360). Crowdsourcing serves to highlight a diversity of experiences, proving there is not one way to be trans*, while simultaneously giving a voice to the trans* community as a whole (Poletti 2020). Common (*transkvir*) themes, linguistic strategies, and cultural reference points tie the stories together. Meanwhile, the specificities of the perspectives offered recall the individuality of the authors: Russophone voices from different locations and with different trans* (non-binary, gender fluid, FTM, MTF, agender, bigender) and queer (lesbian, gay, bisexual, kvir) subjectivities are included. The multimedia formats of the collections reinforce this sense of diversity.

Indeed, the convergence of queer and trans* experiences is one of the most prominent features of the trans* stories. This exploration of the *transkvir* not only works against the limitations placed on trans* people's sexuality, but also against the identity paradigm more broadly.

Moreover, the inability of labels to capture the self—and of the Russian language to capture the *transkvir* self—recurs throughout many narratives. *Transkvir* individuals move through a series of labels, sometimes across multiple languages, presenting a sense of shifting self-definitions over time. Non-binary trans* writers creatively twist grammatical conventions to avoid gendering their 'I' (Kirey-Sitnikova 2021), while trans* people with a masculine or feminine gender identity must consider the political climate they are speaking in when taking a stance on gendering their 'I' for their personal safety. And finally, trans* Russian speakers show that even when language and labels continue to fall short, fiction may provide recourse and permit more authentic self-articulation.

The wealth of innovative trans* stories in Vykhod's publications merit further study. This short article could not fully address all recurrent themes across the three collections, such as mental health, coming out, familial relationships, dysphoria, experiences of surgery, monstrosity, uses of the internet, depictions of trans* life as war, and various means of reclaiming ownership of one's own body (e.g. through tattoos and dance). Future stud-

ies, and comparison to other trans* collective autobiography projects (such as those mentioned above), will gain further insight into experiences of trans* people in Russia and across the Russian-speaking diaspora, and highlight other styles, language, and tropes which trans* speakers use to represent themselves.

Indeed, a greater focus on trans* lived experiences and cultural production will contribute to a more nuanced understanding of gender and sexuality in contemporary Russia. As Egor Gor and Karl Martin's narratives illustrate, trans* masculine people provide a different perspective on how Russians may negotiate the hegemonic masculinity emboldened by Putin's 'macho politics' (Sperling et al. 2022). The specific factors which make

some queer Russian trans* people less likely to talk openly about their gender identity than their sexuality have also not been researched (Voronov et al. 2021). Moreover, trans* people's experiences of Russian LGBTQ+ spaces and activism, and the extent to which they may reject LGBTQ+ activism out of desire to simply be 'normal' (cf. Kirey-Sitnikova 2016: 172–173; Weaver 2020), have not been investigated. These are just some nuances future research could uncover. Trans* voices deserve our attention.

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