Dalton Harrison

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An Evocative Autoethnographic Approach to Being a Transgender Man in a Women's Prison in England

Incarceration Nations Network

Collection Editor
BAZ DREISINGER

LIVED PLACES PUBLISHING

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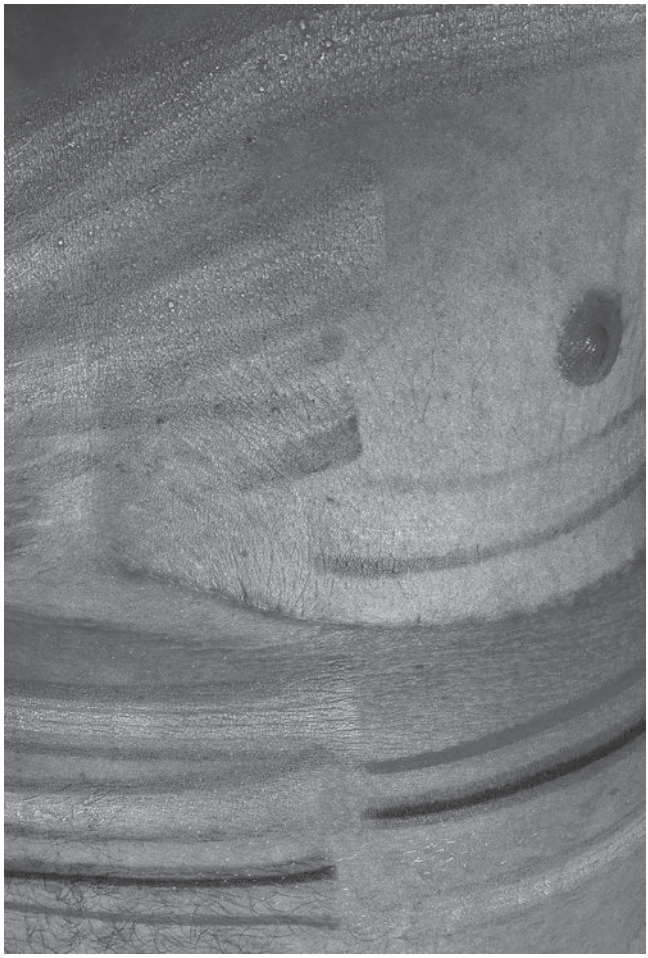
To my mother, you taught me so much, and you always believed in me even when I didn't. I miss you. I hope I made you proud. To my father, and making new memories. To my brother, thank you for being there when I needed you. To my incredible partner, Phoenix, we have been a part of each other's lives for so long. Always missing the chance to say how we really feel, till we finally took that leap. My mum once told me, "Every day is an adventure". You are my biggest adventure.



It's a small act of defiance, a statement that the insights born from lived experience are not just valuable but essential. The road ahead is uncertain, filled with both known and unforeseen challenges. Yet, I press on.

Antojado, D. et al. (2025).

Abstract

This book seeks to address the lack of knowledge on transgender male lives in female prisons. Women are reported in the British prison system as more likely to be suffering from mental health issues, violence, abuse, and trauma than their male counterparts, but what happens to those who do not identify as female in a criminal justice system that overshadows their gendered narratives? This book seeks to address this grey area, showing how transgender men are often further isolated, abused and silenced against a backdrop of political, cultural and media pressures that create a hot topic of transgender issues in contemporary Britain.

Key words

Queer criminology, poetry and performance, Prison, Gender, masculinities, autoethnography, Criminal justice system, identity, FTM, Transgender male.

Contents

Warning

This book contains explicit references to and descriptions of situations which may cause distress. This includes references to and descriptions of:

Micro-aggressions, discrimination, verbal abuse, homophobia, queerphobia, Transphobia, violence, gaslighting, abuse, trauma, self-harm, assault, depression, isolation, mental health, gender identity, gender dysphoria, death, bullying, manipulation, sexism, anxiety, discussions of transition.

Learning objectives

- Examine the way sexuality, gender, and identity challenge the criminal justice process through laws, agencies' participation, and how transgender men participating in this process can impact their experience.
- Analyse the role of intersectionality that includes race, age, class, sexuality, and gender. Through examining this book, look at how intersectional identities influence life experience within criminal justice settings and how this is explored through privilege and the impact of oppression within a transgender male narrative.
- Reflect critically on how feminism can affect both genders' experience in the criminal justice process and how gender-based inequalities could disproportionately affect transgender men.
- In addressing the fact that transgender men inhabit women's prisons while transitioning from female to male, discuss how women's issues and experiences compare and contrast through this process and how exploring female safe spaces in a carceral setting could be reevaluated to create empowering and safe environments that include transgender men and women while promoting resilience and bodily autonomy for both.

Preface

> In the silence.
> In the sound of a single heartbeat.
> I am blind.
> Divined by the past,
> Last to know my journey's road bump lies ahead,
> Before I hit it instead.
> I am spotting the blood of what if.
>
> Harrison (2022) p. 53.

Suppose I passed you in the street. Would you notice anything about me? Perhaps it would depend on which street we were on, what time it was, maybe even what year, and whether you were alone or with someone. I have travelled a long way to reach this point, yet the person you walk past today is not the final version of me. Identity, like gender, is not solid; it is fluid, connecting and moving between an individual's decisions and actions. The day-to-day is so often dismissed as trivial, yet it is what shapes us – and sometimes breaks us. We are social beings, and when we are no longer seen to belong in the world around us, our sense of identity moves toward communities that will accept us, and we adapt to their ideas, principles, and beliefs. I have been fighting to belong all my life.

I was born in 1979, the same year Margaret Thatcher became the first female prime minister. Thatcher's policies called for a return to 'traditional moral values'. This was achieved with Section 28

of the Local Government Act 1988. What followed was Queer communities having to hide themselves while local authorities policed society and schools from promoting the acceptability of homosexuality. It is essential for everyone to look at society and what creates criminality, rather than rely on political and media narratives, especially for those students in law or criminal justice settings who need to understand the impact of policy and legislation, and to ask the question, 'Who does this affect, How will it affect them, and what repercussions will come out of these in community settings'?

Sitting in the back of my school class, I knew I was different. When sex education started, I sat silently, sweating, hoping no one would see me. The me that liked girls. The me who did not know what being transgender was yet, because no one gave me the words, but that did not stop it from existing. In a society that told me I did not fit in with the boys and was not allowed at the girls' table. I sat hidden between my toys and the sofa as the news declared war on non-conformity. I began to hate myself just a little more every day through the eyes of others who told me I was a failure, I was wrong, I was stupid and I needed to change.

Political and media forces shaped my community, defining what was acceptable, what the goal was, and who was valued. Queer bodies were criminalised, dehumanised, and routinely subjected to violence. By the time I was a teenager, Tony Blair had placed crime at the centre of his political agenda in a way no previous Labour leader had, drawing on zero-tolerance approaches that had gained traction in America. Each political landscape has shaped my world and how others see me.

Growing up, I faced taunts about my gender, sexual assault, domestic abuse, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and queerphobia – experiences that only intensified as I transitioned. From 15 to 18, I was trapped in a relationship with a man who always made me dress womanly. I remember falling down the stairs trying to wear the heels he told me to wear. I remember the punches to my head and body. But while wounds and bruises heal, the heart still carries the internal emotional scars.

Each job I went for was limited to a female uniform that made me feel humiliation and shame. I felt like an outcast and lonely in a world that only legitimised men and women. I was constantly being told I was failing as a woman; I was too tall, too stocky, too masculine, so I turned to the one industry where I was allowed to wear a shirt and tie. I applied to the local town council (this was the procedure before the Security Industry Authority took over in 2003 in the UK) to become a door supervisor.

At this time, before the S.I.A (security industry authority), you could go to your local council to complete a course and be registered. It lasted three days, and we were trained by an ex-police officer. I was 19 and was sexually harassed by one male in the group. I was not taken seriously and couldn't get work. No one excepted women in security at this time, and I faced many awkward interviews where one man in charge asked if I ever considered a threesome before, or another interview was spent with two men saying they just wanted to see what kind of woman would do security, and I was treated like a freak.

By 2002, I was 22. As a closeted transgender male who was perceived as a butch lesbian, I finally got my first security position in

a large leisure complex. I was attacked every day, whether it was verbally or physically, but it was a job where I could wear a shirt and tie to work and openly embrace my masculinity. As a gender non-conforming person, I had a spotlight on my head, and this led me to be drawn into a culture of ultra-violence and aggression as one part of me attracted confrontation, and the other side had to prove myself that I was enough. I had been living in a war zone my whole life and had grown up with abuse, violence, aggression and dominance as the natural order. I no longer saw any difference, and it became normalised.

My life had become more chaotic, having spent all my life surrounded by people who did not agree with me just because I was me. I felt socially isolated and constantly under attack. I was not a man nor a woman in their eyes, so I faced the gender war from both sides, neither protected by either.

I had so many crimes committed against me; I was lying in the rubble with chalk lines around me, and all I could do was watch as people stepped on me or over me and walked away.

I have been chased by squaddies, punched in the street, had men confront me with weapons waiting for me after work and attacked by a hen party in the female toilets for walking in on a night out. I have been pushed and spat at, called every name invented by men, women and children. Nothing surprised me anymore. This led to my first night in the cells because I defended myself and two others from being stabbed with a broken bottle and beaten by a man I worked with, who had seen me in the street after work. The only reason they released me from jail in the morning was because when he woke up in the hospital, he

was embarrassed he had been floored by a woman and told the police he had been attacked by a man and we were just there, even though there was CCTV evidence. Each day blurred from childhood bullying to adult confrontations with men and women.

By the time I had reached my 30s, I did not see what I had become. I was a scared, angry, violent shell of a person who would protect myself before being attacked first. I had been involved in three abusive relationships with one man and two women, who had controlled, belittled and mentally and in two cases physically abused me as well. I was so gaslighted that I couldn't see where the real world began, and the mist of my rage started. Every day was a shameful, painful and abusive state of existence, and I didn't know who or what I was anymore, as everyone was screaming at me that I was wrong. I had nothing inside me anymore. My last abusive relationship was so terrifying, I was trapped in a world of hate, and like the relationships before it, it was both normal and horrifying. It becomes a loop, like a record playing backwards, and the distorted sounds play the theme tune of my life.

Life was all about survival, and when prison happened, even though it was a place of death, violence, self-harm, chaos, and abuse, it was the only escape. However, prison spreads that pain and there was no escape from myself via distractions in the outside world; I had to finally face myself. Finally, accept the truth: I had been spending my whole life trying to fit into other people's perceptions of me. Those who told me when I was a child that I was only acting like a boy because I was a tomboy, then later because I was merely a rebellious teenager, this was

followed by the mocking laughter of my peers as an adult, that I was merely copying others as a statement or some trend or fashion choice.

But now I sat in a cell with nothing but myself for company, my body screamed for freedom. But what was freedom? I had found no such place inside or out. I was a prisoner of my body, I was a captive, a minotaur, a Frankenstein. But as I sat in the maze of my own destruction, surrounded by walls, fences, and the sound of alarms and radio echoes. Deep within me, I could not hide anymore. I was a man, not what others had forced me to be. I had spent a lifetime trying, but there was nothing to show for it but the bars blocking out the sun. If they were so right, and I had tried so hard to please them, why was I here?

This changed the day I found my purpose: to help and support others in any way I could. When I discovered the power of education, I knew I could turn my negative experience into a legacy of change and continue to help others. I was living in prison with women who did not have a voice and who had gone through so many traumas that were like my own, but I was not one of them. There was no one like me, and as I transitioned and grew in confidence, I felt I was transcending that journey and gaining a perspective few others had. Education has given me the keys to my own doors. From going into prison with nothing, I was now building myself from the inside out.

By sharing my story, I hope to initiate conversations that give those who have remained quiet the strength to speak and those in prison the power to know that hope can be found in the quiet moments between dawn and a new day. I hope story sparks conversations about trans men, that we are more

than one experience, regardless of our identity, and it serves as one more piece of a mosaic of starting points for academics to look beyond the context of transition, health, and psychology. Everyone deserves a place at the table to create a future that is reimagined, as the current one is not working for anyone.

1
Introduction

I am shackled,
Made to feel less than human,
The shadows mimic movements,
But they are mocking me,
I am currently formless,
I am suddenly voiceless.

Harrison (2021). p. 146.

In this book, I set out to explore the experience of being a transgender man in a female prison using evocative autoethnography to gain insight into the complexities of lived experience within a transgender male narrative in a female prison setting. Trans men are mostly invisible in many rhetorics, but that invisibility is far from safe. What I am attempting to do is use my lived experience to address the absence in literature of trans men's lives in English prisons. Access to this vulnerable and small group is limited due to anonymity and safeguarding concerns. Using the resources and materials from my life, I am trying to highlight how I have moved through society and how my prison pathway has affected me. My personal experience is reflected in the material I have gathered on my life which includes excerpts from my previously published book, *The Boy Behind the Wall,* (Reconnecting Rainbows Press, 2021), the paperwork I have since accessed from

my time inside prison, and the files I received from the Ministry of Justice. I have omitted some references to maintain confidentiality and anonymity.

I have chosen evocative autoethnography as a framework for my writing, enabling me to incorporate poetry and reflective writing to layer my work and convey emotion and authenticity, thereby allowing readers to engage with the topic through a more human narrative. This is also to challenge how knowledge is produced and to legitimise alternative epistemological practices that include poetry as a valued source of understanding and of making meaning of those experiences. At the forefront, autoethnography enables me to foreground my own experience, as the lack of research on the transgender male experience is evident in many academic fields. In the future, I hope that autoethnography will evolve to focus on lived experiences and be taken up by more scholars, helping to bridge the inequality in whose voices are heard, especially those of trans people of colour, and in which forms of knowledge are recognised and legitimised.

Transgender is a term used for those whose presentation or gender identity does not match the sex assigned to them at birth. Transgender was first used in the 1960s but has since become a more fluid term. The term transsexual, which appeared in the mid-twentieth century, is problematic because it relates only to medical transition. The term 'Cisgender' or 'cis' is a complementary term to transgender; this adjective was coined in the 1990s, referring to a person whose gender identity aligns with the sex they were assigned at birth. There are many ways to be trans; people often view it as a simple pathway that aligns with men and women. But identifying as transgender does not

automatically mean medically transitioning and can involve just socially transitioning.

I left school just before my 16th birthday with no qualifications. I was vulnerable and scared in a violent, coercive relationship with an older man. I came out of this abusive relationship at 18 and was left trying to pick up the pieces of my life. I trained in security at 19. In turn, I found myself in a world I knew well, one comprised of violence and toxic masculinity. It was at this time that I entered another abusive relationship with a woman. After that, I found myself at 22 with a woman who I thought would be better. I told her I was transgender, but she did not accept it. I still could not find a safe space to be me. My world revolved around gendered violence in the street, at my workplace, and in my social life. In these spaces, victimisation can be committed by partners, family, and friends. In other words, 'coming out' has risks in every situation.

How does a lack of autonomy affect a person when, everywhere they turn, they find themselves trapped with limited resources and support? What happens when this begins in childhood and continues into adulthood? Psychologically, they may struggle to regulate their emotions or respond proportionately to their surroundings. They may find it difficult to understand their own feelings after being repeatedly told that what they know about themselves – including their gender – is misguided or delusional.

What becomes of a person who cannot go a single day without facing media hostility, institutional and professional indifference or neglect, alongside a society that meets them with micro-aggressions, mockery, and emotional or physical abuse? This

multi-layered system creates a mosaic of mental distress, marginalisation, and discrimination, all interwoven with violence and upheld by gatekeepers who create further barriers to accessing appropriate healthcare, safe housing, and employment.

In 2013, after a voluntary police interview, I received a call three months later saying that I was being charged alongside someone else with ABH (Actual Bodily Harm). It was a threatening argument involving three family members that started with some missing money, and everyone involved had a different story. My mind at the time was skewed, and my mental health and past had caught up with me, and I did not see who I was anymore in a world that only showed me violence and abuse. I was constantly surviving moment to moment and could not escape myself or my situations as my world came crashing down.

Entering the criminal justice system, I quickly became aware of how the law views gender. I was told off the record by my solicitor, which later continued with my barristers to try not to be LGBT, grow my hair, dress differently, and be more "womanly". They told me that the jury would fear what they did not understand, and it could work against me. I knew what society thought of me, and now I knew what the authorities thought of gender and how they were fixated on a need to control my queer body and my right to live as my authentic self. I felt like a criminal long before anyone said I was guilty.

It could be suggested that the political arena has paved a platform for growing public debate on transgender topics, which has now created a hot topic that has spread into prisons. For instance, the British Prime Minister at the Conservative Party

annual conference in Manchester in 2023 highlighted the speech by Rishi Sunak, who said, 'We shouldn't get bullied into believing that people can be any sex they want to be. They can't; a man is a man, and a woman is a woman. That's just common sense.' It is a common practice in speeches to connect anti-trans terminology and keywords surrounding politics to create moral panic and, in turn, the policing of transgender bodies within a criminal context.

The transgender population, according to the Ministry of Justice and HM Prison and Probation Service (2025) and the HMPPS Official Statistics Offender Equalities Annual Report 2024 to 2025, highlight that there are 339 transgender prisoners as of 31 March 2025, with only 63 of them assigned female at birth. This statistic is widely accepted as only an estimate of the true number, as many prisoners leave the system before they can be included in the statistics. In many cases, there may be a fear of disclosing such information in a highly gendered environment. But what is clear is that since the 31 of March 2024, the transgender prison population has increased by 15 per cent. In contrast, over the same period, the total prison population rose by less than 0.1 per cent. Is this the reality of the last few years' increase in transphobic media and political rhetoric showing in the realities of transgender lives, or something else? It is unclear what impact the recent April 2025 UK Supreme Court ruling determining sex as biological sex will have on the transgender community in the long term.

But when I look at how my life has been shaped by society's views of me. I realised none of this was new. As a girl growing up in the 80s, I was taught to take responsibility for myself as

a female, that I had to behave, dress, and protect and manage myself in society. I had to play with certain toys, be gentle and kind, and learn to look after children. I had to be home before it gets dark. Always be in pairs. Be safe. Watch out. This was something I did not realise was happening until my brother was born, and I saw how he was treated and taught to behave. How his freedom was managed and how he was allowed to take up space in the world in a way I was not supposed to. Before I even understood what transgender was, I had to fight the stigma and pains of being seen as female in a world that was built for men. As I grew, my masculinity was not rewarded, as female masculinity was read as lesbianism. Being bullied in school was nothing compared to how men reacted as adults; the general attitude of 'I can put you right' was an everyday battle in the 90s and 2000s.

Living in the twenty-first century as an out lesbian was not easy, but I always had the hope that it would get easier. I have gone from being told I won't get that job as they need a man, to I won't get that job as they support women as marginalised groups, and I am a man. Fighting for gay rights has become less of a battle as being transgender has replaced the fight for gay rights as the next moral panic, as the arguments of 'I am just like you, only we have a different sexuality' do not apply in this conversation. I am not like any gender, as I have seen the world from both sides. I have lived in two bodies. I understand how society is constructed on unwritten rules and bias. I am an activist because of who I am, not what I do. Being transgender is the ultimate 'fuck you' in a system that wants control, power, and dominance over difference.

Paused

Time was the noose around my neck
Too late to prove who I was, even to myself
I was a war
Battles fought and won on enemy lines
My lines crossed
My paths lost
Chalked out like crime scenes
I am unseen
Just left on pause

Harrison (2021). p. 55.