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# A History of Classifying Trans Subjects at the Library of Congress before 1963

Beck Schaefer

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Moving Trans History Forward  
March 13, 2021

Thanks, I'm in Toronto which is on the traditional territory of many Indigenous Nations. The area known as Tkaronto has been care taken by the Anishinabek Nation, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, and the Huron-Wendat. It is now home to many Indigenous Peoples. I acknowledge the current treaty holders, the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation. This territory is subject of the Dish with One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant, an agreement to peaceably share and care for the Great Lakes region.

Before I get started I want to mention that I'll be using terms and concepts for transness and queerness that come from the first half of the twentieth century and that some of those terms may be harmful. I've tried to limit this terminology to discussions of its use in primary sources. Otherwise, I'll use current terminology to describe feelings or behaviours but not to project early 21<sup>st</sup> century identities onto people in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I'll also use the term intersex to refer to bodies with ambiguous genitalia or a combination of observable male and female sex characteristics.

Today I'll be presenting on A History of Classifying Trans Subjects at the Library of Congress before 1963. Why 1963? That was the year that the Library of Congress (or LC) established its first classification number for trans subjects. The number was to be used for "change of sex" and was found in the category of "other sexual deviations", a sub-category of psychiatry and psychopathology. There were, however, trans books published before

1963 so I was curious as to how cataloguers at LC classified these books. Looking at cataloging practices gives us some insight as to how people outside the transworld made sense of gender variance when confronted with it. It's possible that some of the catalogers weren't aware of transness, especially prior to Christine Jorgensen's highly publicized transition in 1952.

# Introduction to Library Classification

- Library of Congress classification: alphanumeric classification numbers to physically organize library books by subject
- Books are classified based on a brief assessment of content
- If no matching classification number exists, cataloguer chooses something close enough or more general
- Library of Congress cataloguers
  - can create new classification numbers for emerging topics
  - narrow demographic: privilege

Let's start with some background on the Library of Congress classification system before getting into how it was applied to trans books. LC classification is a system that uses alphanumeric classification numbers to physically organize library books by subject. The letters at the beginning represent the disciplinary focus and the remainder of the classification number expresses the narrower topical focus. The numbers I'll be discussing today come from the H schedule for social sciences and R for medicine. The system was developed by LC in the late 19th century and is a product of that era - the hierarchical structure has remained largely the same and reflects 19th century attitudes. The system is set out in schedules that are regularly revised and updated to accommodate new topics. To justify establishing a new classification number, LC would have to identify something as being a new topic distinct from topics already covered. They would only establish a classification number if they anticipated that more books would be published on the same topic.

To classify a book, a cataloguer looks at the cover, title page, table of contents and any summaries on the book to figure out what it's about. If these aren't sufficient, the cataloguer will also check the index, bibliography, introduction and/or conclusion. Using this information, they'll determine the disciplinary focus of the book and its primary topic. They may also be aware that the book is similar to other books previously catalogued in which

case they would look those up to see how they were classified. The cataloguer may also check dictionaries, encyclopedias or other reference sources if they are unfamiliar with the topic. The cataloguer will then check the classification schedules to find a number that matches the primary topic that they identified and most of the time, they'll find one. If not, the cataloguer could use a number that is either close enough or more general. LC catalogers also have the option of creating a new classification number.

Although my research gives insight into outside opinions about transness, these opinions come from a small, homogenous group of people: Library of Congress cataloguers. The cataloguers would have been university educated, many with graduate degrees. Since they worked at the Library of Congress, they were U.S. government employees and lived in the Washington, D.C. area. The catalogers were probably all white and mostly men. Regardless of the demographic of the individual catalogers, if the Library of Congress was a person it would be a wealthy straight white Christian cis-man putting considerable effort into maintaining that power and privilege.

## My Research Process

- Compiled a list of early trans books from bibliographies
- Looked up the classification numbers in LC's catalogue
- Found those classification numbers in the relevant schedules
- Did a cataloguer's assessment to determine subject
- Why did the cataloguer classify it this way?
- What were social ideas about transness at this time?

To determine how trans books were classified before 1963, I gathered a list of early trans books from bibliographies and looked up the classification numbers in LC's catalogue. I then found those classification numbers in the relevant schedules. Of the around 20 trans books that LC had catalogued before 1963, I selected five books that were classified in a way that takes gender into account. I got copies of the books and looked at them as a cataloguer would – so I may discuss these books in a way that doesn't accurately reflect the entirety of their contents or context.

Coincidentally, the five books are remarkably similar so the differences in classification can be attributed to changes in catalogers' thinking over time rather than differences between the books. Four of these are autobiographies and the other is a biography of Lili Elbe which draws heavily on her letters and diaries, so her own thoughts about her gender are represented. All the subjects are presented as intersex but it's likely that not all of them were. There are a few reasons for this. An intersex condition made it easier to access surgery and elicited sympathy in a way that gender non-conformity did not. Many transpeople genuinely believed that their cross-gender feelings must have a physical cause. All my subjects consulted doctors and most had had surgery. All the subjects are European or American and white. This will have influenced their ideas about gender and their ability to access doctors and have their stories published. It also influenced the

cataloguers' interpretations of the books.

## *Memoirs of a Man's Maiden Years* by N.O. Body (1907)

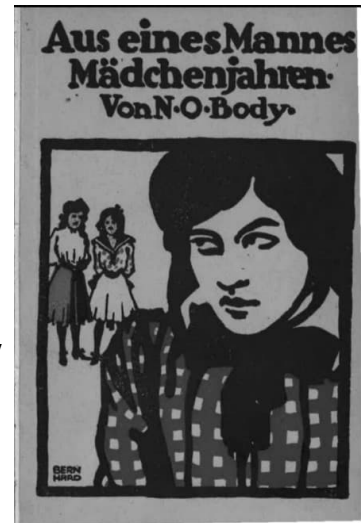
"the physical properties of the newborn were so strange that [the midwife] was unable to decide to which sex the child belonged"

"I was born a boy, raised as a girl"

"the inner nature of my masculinity...felt strongly from within"

"I resolved to undertake the decisive outer transformation"

Cover from: Body, N.O. *Aus eines Mannes Mädchenjahren*. Berlin: Gustav Rieckes Buchhandlung, 1907.  
<https://archive.org/details/nobody1907/mode/2up>



Memoirs of a man's maiden years was published in Germany in 1907 and has an epilogue by pioneering sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld. I looked at the 2006 English translation. N.O. Body explains early in this memoir that he was born with ambiguous genitalia, assigned female at birth and brought up as a girl. He started living as a man in his early 20s. He describes great suffering from this upbringing and his aim in writing the book is to raise sympathetic understanding. The author considers himself to have a physical problem that is made much worse by social attitudes.



## HQ23 Sex relations. Minor works (1907)

SOCIAL GROUPS: THE FAMILY. MARRIAGE

Sex relations

General works

Minor

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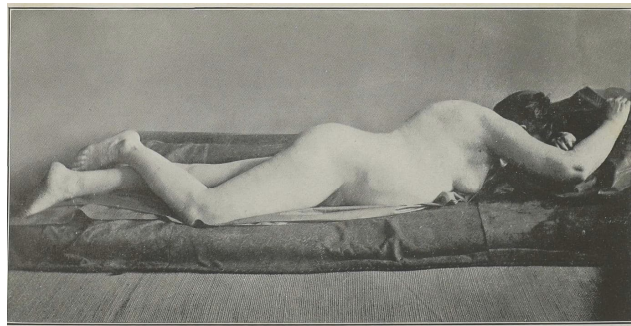
- "Sex" means sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, and/or sexuality
- Not classified in abnormal sex relations
- N.O. Body's sympathetic tone and desire to be normal

The cataloger classified this book in HQ 23 for minor works on sex relations. At this point, LC used the term "sex relations" to encompass many concepts related to sexuality and gender. A few other early trans books were also classified in this category. There was a separate classification for "abnormal sexual relations" which the cataloger opted not to use – likely because N.O. Body presents himself in a way that doesn't suggest abnormality. Instead, he strives for normalcy. He is a man who wants to live as a man and his transition corrects a mistaken gender assignment. The abnormal aspect of N.O. Body's story is that he was raised as a girl. The author's presentation of his identified gender as natural influenced the cataloger's decision to consider this a "minor" rather than "abnormal" aspect of sexuality.

In general, the catalogers didn't classify trans books with abnormal sexual relations - the one exception in all the books I reviewed was a pair of autobiographies by Earl Lind, aka Ralph Werther, aka Jennie June.

***Autobiography of an Androgyne* (1918)  
*The Female-Impersonators* (1922)**  
by Earl Lind, aka Ralph Werther, aka Jennie June

"I was brought into the world as one of the rare humans who possess a strong claim, on anatomic grounds as well as psychic, to membership in both the recognized sexes. I was foreordained to live part of my life as man and part as woman."



The Author — A Modern Living Replica of the Ancient Greek Statue of "Hermaphroditos."

From: Lind, Earl. *Autobiography of an Androgyne*. New York: Medico-Legal Journal, 1918. Photograph by A.W. Herzog.  
[https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/WNCWCO065863656/AHSI?u=yorku\\_main&sid=AHSI&xid=85e774c9&pg=5](https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/WNCWCO065863656/AHSI?u=yorku_main&sid=AHSI&xid=85e774c9&pg=5)

Lind was a female impersonator who otherwise lived as a man and had undergone castration. They write that they have a woman's soul and a body that is 1/3 female and 2/3 male. Lind wrote *Autobiography of an androgyne* for medical professionals and it was published in the U.S. in 1918. In it, Lind discusses their gender and sexuality. Four years later, a follow-up book, *The Female-Impersonators*, was published. It profiles female impersonators from New York's queer and trans subculture. Both books have significant sexual content and include artistic nude photographs of the author.

## HQ76 Homosexuality (1918, 1922)

SOCIAL GROUPS: THE FAMILY. MARRIAGE

Abnormal sex relations

Homosexuality

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- "androgynes" as a subclass of "homosexualists"
- female-impersonators associated with a queer subculture
- Lind seems uninterested in fitting into the gender binary
- significant sexual content and inclusion of nude photos

These books were classed in HQ 76 for Homosexuality which was under the heading Abnormal sex relations. That these are the only two books that were classed in Homosexuality tells me that unless there was an explicit linkage of gender variance with queerness, the cataloguer did not make that connection on their own. The first book defines "androgynes" as a subclass of "homosexualists", so the cataloguer is treating the book as it presents itself. Since the second book references the first and covers similar subject matter, the cataloguer would use the same classification. In addition to the explicit link that Lind makes between androgynes and homosexuality, it's easy to see how a cataloguer would interpret the content of these books as abnormal. Unlike the other people I discuss, Lind seems uninterested in fitting into the gender binary. That, along with the focus on a sexual subculture and inclusion of nude photos probably put this book outside the bounds of what the cataloguer considered normal.

## *Man into Woman* by Niels Hoyer (1933)

"[Lili Elbe] became convinced that [she] was a sort of twin being, part male and part female in one body... [After surgery, she] felt [herself] to be entirely a woman"



From: *Man into Woman: An Authentic Record of a Change of Sex*. Ed. Niels Hoyer  
London: Jarrolds, 1933. Photographer unknown. License: [CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

## *Roberta Cowell's Story* by Roberta Cowell (1954)

"...at last my dual sexuality was resolved and I became a complete and normal Woman"

*An Autobiography*



*Roberta Cowell's Story*

Title page from: Cowell, Roberta. *Roberta Cowell's Story*. New York: British Book Centre, 1954. <https://library.transgenderzone.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/RCStory.pdf>

This next pair of books return to the narrative we saw in *Memoirs of a man's maiden years*. Both *Man into woman* and *Roberta Cowell's story* are biographies where the subject is presented as intersex, a condition that causes them distress. Unlike *Memoirs of a man's maiden years*, both emphasize surgery as an effective physical and psychological solution.

*Man into woman : an authentic record of a change of sex* from 1933 is the biography of Lili Elbe, a Danish artist whose cross-gender feelings led her to believe that she had ovaries in addition to her external male genitalia. Elbe undergoes a number of surgeries, one of which apparently discovered rudimentary ovaries. She died of complications from a later surgery.

*Roberta Cowell's story* from 1954 is the autobiography of a British woman who writes about having physical abnormalities and physically feminine characteristics and explains that trying to deny this part of her caused her great anguish. She decided to transition and considered herself quote "a complete and normal woman" after surgery.

## RC883 Hermaphroditism (1933, 1954)

RC883 INTERNAL MEDICINE

Diseases of the genitourinary system. Urology

Diseases and functional disorders of the genital organs

Congenital anomalies

Hermaphroditism

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- created for *Man into Woman*
- shift from sexuality and gender to medicine
- cross-gender feelings now thought to have a physical cause that could be addressed by surgery

Both books were classed in RC883 for Hermaphroditism, a subcategory of congenital anomalies of the genitourinary system.

This classification number was created for *Man into woman*. This represents a shift in thinking about transness - it's moved from sexuality and gender to medicine. Transness has become a medical issue - cross-gender feelings were thought to have a physical cause that could be addressed by surgery. It's not yet being thought of as psychological deviance.

By the time Roberta Cowell's story is published in 1954 public ideas about transness were beginning to diverge from the concept of intersex. This was thanks in no small part to the publicity surrounding Christine Jorgensen's transition in December of 1952 - she'd had surgery to align her body with her sense of her gender, rather than to address an intersex condition. Once transness became about one's sense of identity, psychiatrists and psychologists entered the public discussion and many began casting transness as a type of sexual deviance or perversion.

## Conclusions

- 1907: HQ Sexual relations
  - 1918-1922: HQ Homosexuality
  - 1933-1954: RC Hermaphroditism
  - 1963-1980: RC Change of sex
  - 1980-now : HQ Transsexualism
- } Based on trans self-representation
- } Based on cultural concepts and "expert" opinions

Without a concept of transness, the cataloguers had to rely solely on the way the authors presented themselves which resulted in less harmful and more accurate classifications.

These ideas soon took hold and, by 1963, when LC catalogued its next trans book, the cataloguer determined that it was necessary to create a new classification number for transness - RC560.C4 for "Change of sex" which was part of a list of sexual deviations in the category of abnormal psychiatry. Once established with the explicit heading "Change of sex", it becomes the standard for trans books until 1980 when HQ77.7 is established for transsexualism. In the schedules HQ77.7 follows the numbers for homosexuality and lesbianism. This arrangement reflects the current understanding of trans as a social group or identity closely associated with queerness. Interestingly, this also gets closer to the earlier classifications. I don't think that this is indicative of better social attitudes towards transpeople in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. I think that it shows that without a concept of transness, the cataloguers had to rely solely on the way the authors presented themselves which resulted in less harmful and more accurate classifications.

Thank you!

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