‘The Odd Couple’: Trans* Characters and Disabled Buddies in Two Works of Fiction

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Abstract

This paper explores some of the tropes that fictional representations of trans* and disabled characters in literature and film share. In doing so it seeks to suggest that the experiences of real-life trans* people and people with disabilities might overlap to some degree: in matters of medical supervision and intervention (sometimes unwanted), social discrimination, being stared at, and violence. But also there is the shared experience of being mis-represented in certain ways in fiction and on film.

In fiction the environment often used for disabled characters may evoke pity, horror or disgust (Garland-Thompson, 1997). I argue that this is also frequently the case for trans* characters in books and on film too. The suggestion that a trans* or disabled character might be a ‘fake’ is also explored, with its concomitant trope of narrative ‘exposure’. The general trend to see trans* and disabled experience as being so non-normative that it must become the entire focus of a character’s characterisation, or that this aspect of the character’s life must be used to further the story’s plot-line is noted.

Later the paper discusses two books where such tropes are generally avoided and the characterisation is more subtle. These are, *The Turbulent Term of Tyke Tiler* by Gene Kemp (1978) aimed at middle grade readers, and *The Cereus Blooms at Night* by Shani Mootoo (1999) which is aimed at adults. The paper explores how the presentation of the trans* character appears alongside a representation of disabled buddy in these two books. Why has this occurred and does this undermine or complement the trans*’ characters narrative?

The paper concludes by suggesting a positive future in terms of new writing and what may become more prevalent in literature and on film. What is perhaps desirable is the utilisation of trans* and disabled characters as ordinary rather than extraordinary in their trans* and disabled selves, storylines that do not focus upon this aspect beyond all other aspects of characterisation, and the opportunity for such characters to lead traditional genre fictions.

Keyword/Terms

Disability, normative, character, representation, fiction, trans*

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Introduction

My experience within the LGBTQIA (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans*, queer, intersex and asexual) community started in the early 1990s when the acronym 'L&G' (lesbian and gay) was the norm. This stretched to 'LGB' (B for bisexual) as I finished university. In the late 90s I worked for a radio programme, *Gaytalk*, at BBC GMR in the UK. During that time I spent the first six months trying to convince my co-presenter and producer that I was bisexual and not a lesbian, as they kept forgetting: that is how unfamiliar 'bisexual' was at the time. I made a point of including and representing stories from the less represented parts of our communities, and brought in lesbians, bisexual women and men, and trans* people for interviews and features. By the late nineties we were using 'LGBT' for campaigning work, adding the 'T' to include what was then defined as transgender and transsexual people.

At this time we used the term 'transgender' to represent anyone with a degree of gender fluidity, those who blurred gender norms and passed to and fro between the traditional polarities of male and female. This included drag queens, drag kings and transvestites. Fifteen years later in academia I found that published theory used 'transgender' to include butch lesbians and camp gay men. I saw butch and camp identities in my friends as *consistent* presentation and behaviour and not the to-ing and fro-ing that the transgender fluidity seemed to suggest. This general idea of fluidity and performativity around gender meant that the term 'transsexual' became allotted to those who felt the need to cross the line of gender presentation or performance more permanently; those who might seek a medical ally who could prescribe hormone treatment or surgical interventions to bring their body into line with their identity.

This is a complex area that is not the focus of this paper, but I wish to make it clear that I have close friends who define as transsexual and are feminists and that this term 'transsexual' is one we have used without negative judgement for twenty years. It is a sub-group of the broader trans* arena. Recently I have heard it suggested that the term might be offensive and this is not my intention (perhaps it will come back as 'crip' has done?). I am comfortable using trans* to stand for the broader categorization of various people who are not cis-gendered, but I think transsexual has a place in our vocabulary as a word that attaches to the position taken by those who *do* wish to take medical assistance to change their body form. 'Trans*' may now be an inclusive short-hand for various forms of self-definition, but in the past academics such as Judith Butler have differentiated and valorised transgender 'performers' at the expense of transsexual 'essentialists', suggesting that transsexuals have misunderstood their sex/gender status and are inherently conservative and prey to patriarchal values, whilst transgender people are radical and politically more liberated (1990, pp.144-146). I do not agree with this view although I understand how it has arisen. In terms of the fiction explored in this paper none of the above terms are

used *at all* by the authors (including 'disabled'), but within an analytic approach it becomes hard to avoid them.

With regards to the terminology 'disabled characters' and 'characters with disabilities' I will move between the two. Australian crip activist Stella Young was comfortable using 'disabled woman' about herself in 2014:

"There are all kinds of fights about whether we are allowed to say 'disabled people' at all. It's 'people with disabilities' that's all the rage. 'Cause we're, like, people first, you know? And if we don't say that we're people, folks might get confused. But I've never had to say that I'm a person who's a woman, or a person who is Australian, or a person who knits. Somehow, we're supposed to buy this notion that if we use the term disabled too much, it might strip us of our personhood ... I started calling myself a disabled woman, and a crip."

Like Young, I am a disabled woman and my concern lies with content and ideas rather than distinctions around word order, which might very well change again in twenty years.

My thesis suggests that there are similarities and intersections between trans* people's experience (in life and fiction) and the experience of their disabled buddies. Where a transsexual person seeks medical interventions some of their experience will overlap with the experiences of any person who is in receipt of long-term medical treatment or monitoring, and thus there will be intersections with some (although not all) people's experience of disability: medical supervision, social prejudice, being stared at, violence, verbal attacks or misunderstandings are all possible. The latter events might also be experienced by a trans* person who does not seek medical intervention. Like many disabled people, trans* people may not define as having an illness but simply being in a 'situation' or as having non-normative bodily presentation. For a trans* person to define as disabled would usually take an additional traditional disability or impairment, yet there are many commonalities in experience. We might observe these commonalities and see the potential for disabled and trans* people to become allies. Authors may make this link intuitively. This paper will look at two novels, *The Turbulent Term of Tyke Tiler* and *The Cereus Blooms at Night*, where a character who is trans* is shown with another significant character who has a more traditional experience of disability.

Whilst writers are expected to use research and their imagination to create and sustain believable fictional worlds it can be the case that writers default to what is readily known when creating protagonists hence the many mainstream books that feature white, middle class, heterosexual, cis-gendered, able-bodied characters. When a writer writes outside these proscribed norms there are associated risks: in the response from agents and publishers who may worry about sales, and also from presumed readers. Increasingly some non-normative

characters have been welcomed by publishers: for example, even a cursory glance at bookstores' shelves reveal that female and black/ people of colour characters are more represented in fiction than they were fifty years ago. But there is still a relative absence of trans* or disabled characters. Occasionally an author writes from within such a group but frequently with trans* or disabled characters the writers are cis and non-disabled.

Where stories featuring non-normative characters do exist there is a risk that writers from a privileged position outside that experience may misrepresent those they seek to portray. Thus the author may fall into character stereotypes or plot tropes, in part because they may not know what these are. I will now discuss some of the most common tropes appearing in disability and trans* fiction and on film, before considering my two chosen books.

Common Tropes in Disability and Trans* Fiction and Film

Stereotypes occur when writers are unable to relate to their characters as fully rounded individuals and become fixated on one element of their being. In the case of disabled and trans* characters, the characters' gender fluidity or their disability seem so anomalous to the author that the character may become two-dimensional, leaving the reader only aware of the trans* and disability elements of their fictional lives. Garland-Thompson considers the reader who frequently makes the 'assumption that a disability cancels out other qualities, reducing the complex person to a single attribute' (1997, p. 12). So, readers and writers are liable to reduce non-normative characters to solely that physical or cognitive aspect that makes them different from the other characters (also implying that they are 'the only one').

When this occurs we might also observe 'narrative prosthesis', a concept put forward by Snyder and Mitchell in their 2001 discussion of disability in literature. Here, disability (or a disabled character) is added on and comes to 'stand in' for something else. The character with a disability is not simply a character who happens to be disabled, the disability must artificially serve a plot function. For example, a sudden impairment may be used as a punishment or learning opportunity within the narrative, or a disability might symbolize something, being both real and metaphorical in function (e.g. blindness may symbolize insightfulness or psychic powers). Disabled characters are constantly being 'interpreted' (2001, p.60).

In the late 1960s and 70s some male-to-female transsexual characters were utilised in a parallel manner. They were used to explore those decades' ideas about male and female roles and relationships. Books such as Gore Vidal's *Myra Breckenridge* (1968) or Angela Carter's *The Passion of the New Eve* (1977) were not offering realistic or rounded characters but creating ideological vessels through which the writers could dramatize their own thoughts on gender politics. In part,

this was explicit since the plots were deliberately fantastical (how could the characters be real?), but as so few representations of trans* lives were in print these stories might have added to a sense amongst cis-gendered readers that such people were almost alien. Trans* characters' storylines rarely went beyond that discussion of sex and gender. So, the trans* character is not permitted to be the detective in a crime drama but becomes the victim or a suspect – a place where their gender status takes on a special narrative meaning through which the cis detective might deduce a solution to a mystery. The gender expression of the trans* character is the hook on which to further a plot and like the disabled character they will be 'interpreted'.

The shock value of the exposed trans* figure is also commonly utilised. For example, an audience is led to see the character as male and he is then exposed as 'really female', or the reverse. It might be less of a problem if the experiences of ordinary trans* people were already represented in fiction but they are not. The exposure trope can be sympathetically done but overall I feel authors are too attached to it.

I will briefly discuss film here, in order to introduce further tropes and pitfalls for writers who may wish to create trans* and disabled characters. Trans* characters may occupy film space as primary characters but rarely as background or secondary characters. Disabled characters in contrast might occupy the spotlight or be seen as secondary characters or as extras. The latter is usually to create a specific effect, such as an apocalyptic world where many people have become disabled as the result of chemical warfare, etc. and is quite often a negative portrayal where the disabled characters are not afforded a voice or are present purely in order to be rescued. Where characters with disabilities are to the fore in a storyline they are rarely allowed to own their disability and exist as an ordinary character with ordinary concerns. Instead they must interact with their disability as though it were extraordinary. This might operate in a negative fashion (James Bond villains and Greek mythological monsters who are one-eyed or half-human half-bull figures), or in a more positive but still clichéd fashion (the superheroes that X-Men provides).

Since disability is not regarded as ordinary by writers it is possible to play a game of 'how soon will this disability be used for plot purposes?' whenever a minor character appears on screen with a visible impairment. So, the minor character who whizzes about in a wheelchair or uses a stick on screen may well leap out of that chair or throw away that stick, in order to steal something, kill somebody, or smuggle drugs (inside their walking aids), before the film or episode's end. This representation of disability as something purposefully *fake* is an unpleasant stereotype and it also creates predictable plotting once audiences become aware of it. At both the level of social fairness *and* good writing technique the trope ought to be challenged. Were viewers more familiar with this trope then the revelation of Keyser Soze's identity in *The Usual Suspects* would not have been a

surprise at all: Verbal Kint is the only main character who is portrayed as having a disability so logically he must be hiding something, or be a fake.

Trans* characters may also be presented as 'fake', attempting to deceive those around them with a false persona. Even where a writer is sympathetic to the circumstances that might cause a person to adopt differing presentations, the very set-up and potential for dramatic exposure of the 'fake' seems hard for the writer to resist.

A literary disability studies approach, such as that posed by Garland-Thompson, suggests the reader is usually offered a restricted range of emotional responses to disabled figures in literature and on screen. These are often fear, disgust or pity (1997, p.44). I would argue that this is also applicable to the portrayal of trans* characters. Disabled *and* trans characters have been placed in genres associated with horror or melodrama. *Dressed to Kill* or *Silence of the Lambs* for example, play on suspense and horror, where the revelation of a serial killer's identity uses the trans* exposure trope. Indeed the 'explanation' of their horrific deeds relies on a complex (but ultimately unrealistic and negative) psychological understanding of the killer as conflicted because of their desire to be 'the other sex'.

In contrast screenplays devised from true life stories more often show the trans* character as a victim rather than a perpetrator of violence, and so invite pity. The victim position is a more accurate reflection of real life where trans* people (and disabled people) are more likely to be subjected to hate crime than be its perpetrators. For example, the real-life murder of female-to-male Brandon Teena was re-invented as the film *Boys Don't Cry* (1999). But no-one wants to be pitied; people want respect and human rights.

Furthermore, disability and trans* storylines may use traditional 'kill or cure' trajectories. Thus, 'normality' is restored in many dramas either by a return to the start (a 'cure' or restorative ending) or by an erasure of the challenging character (a 'kill' ending). The trans* character presented as a monster may be killed off in dramas where they are a villain. For example, Buffalo Bill, the apparently trans* serial killer in *Silence of the Lambs*, is shot dead. The psychiatrist Dr Elliot, who turns out to be the murdering trans* figure in *Dressed to Kill*, is sent to a secure hospital at the end of that film, presumably for a cure or for containment.

Other films and texts might reject the axes of horror and pity and their counterpart kill or cure endings. The two books I wish to discuss now manage to avoid both horror and pity. Instead the trans* character occupies their space and story-world on their own terms, as do the characters with disabilities, although arguably the first book uses its disabled character to highlight the narrator's good qualities and is thus not as pro-disability as it might appear.

The Turbulent Term of Tyke Tiler

The first book I have chosen to examine for trans* and disability tropes is a children's book, *The Turbulent Term of Tyke Tiler*, which has been popular with primary schools in the UK since its publication in 1978. Tyke, the narrator, is around ten years old. He may be a tomboy girl who will grow up to be a female adult, or someone who will become a transsexual teenager, or a 21st century trans* person; this 'destination' is not the book's concern. The book's story occurs across one summer term and thus the longer-term story of Tyke's life, and any definitions we apply to it, must remain open.

Tyke narrates the story in the first person. Near the beginning Mrs Somers accosts Tyke in the playground:

'Don't mumble child. And look up when a member of staff speaks to you.'
I looked up and got a mouthful of rain.
'Now, don't play about, hurry along to the classroom.'
She used my real name, the one I hate, so I pulled my worst, most horrible face at her, the slit-eyed, yellow-tooth, ears-wiggling, monster-from-the-centre-of-the-earth one. After she had gone, of course. (p.6)

This extract typifies the type of narration used: Tyke against the world. A hint of what is to come is there but it is subtle, 'she used my real name, the one I hate'. The name Mrs Somers uses is, we learn at the end of the book, a girl's name. The book manages to keep the character of Tyke consistent throughout and avoids personal pronouns, but readers quickly assume from Tyke's name, clothes, behaviours, friends and so forth, that Tyke is a boy. The 'twist' is that Tyke is a girl. This may, of course, sound like the previously criticised trope of exposure but the thoroughness of the story, and the fact it is told through Tyke's own eyes, makes it hold up (Tyke cannot be exposed to himself).

The book may be read as a trans* narrative where the child fiercely maintains their boy identity regardless of the views of adult characters. This is exciting for a reader looking for such stories which are certainly infrequent in children's literature. What lets this down for the reader who values Tyke as trans*, is that once the book reveals Tyke's 'actual' sex (allowing us the interpretation that Tyke is somehow trans* rather than cis-gendered as a boy or girl), the story closes down. The reader has little time to process the information and continue the story-journey with Tyke. It is even possible that Tyke's 'journey' has somehow ended. However, a reading where Tyke may grow up to be queer (e.g. perhaps a butch lesbian in later life, or a butch straight woman) may make the ending less disappointing or restrictive.

One should acknowledge a particular difficulty with this type of narration for the writer. All of us (male, female, cis or trans*) might read books written in

the first person and identify with the narrator (whether male or female), and 'inhabit' the narrator's point-of-view. This is an imaginative act of reading we frequently perform. But for the story to offer representation of trans* experience then there must be a degree of information that contradicts that imaginative inhabitation: sex and gender cannot be taken for granted but must become explicit where the character sees themselves as something different to how they are seen by outsiders. In a similar way writers differentiate girl characters from boy characters, black characters from white characters, disabled characters from able-bodied characters, heterosexual from 'queer' characters etc. There is an assumed normative position in publishing and the default reading position seems to reflect this, even where readers do not belong to the default positions themselves. So, a trans* character at some point has to be shown as trans* and not cis. As the internal logic of a first person narration may not need this disjuncture to occur (i.e. this is not a problem for the character's self-understanding), how to do this subtly without falling prey to the exposure trope is a conundrum for the writer.

The way this is done in Tyke's story is by an external occurrence towards the end of the book. Tyke climbs a tower: 'Get down at once, Theodora Tiler, you naughty, disobedient girl!' shouts Mrs Somers (p.120). Tyke falls and is removed to hospital and also from narrating the book. This is a shock to the reader so the author might be accused of exploiting the exposure trope. Mrs Somers 'exposes' Tyke to the reader as a girl, but what was more frustrating for me was the fact that the book ended just *five* pages later. The benevolent Mr Merchant, Tyke's class teacher steps in and concludes the book by transposing Tyke into a third person 'she' and a tomboy. The male teacher's closure of the tale does seem to suggest Tyke's eventual reincorporation into mainstream gender norms by exposing us to the adults' version of reality. It even 'cures' and silences Tyke by placing him in a hospital bed at the end. For all that, the book is one of very few examples of a possible trans* child protagonist in children's literature for this age group (8-12s).

Another area of representation worth exploring in this book is the positioning of Tyke with his best friend Danny. Quicke analyses this book from the point-of-view of disability representation focussing on Danny. In the first chapter Danny has stolen a ten pound note from a teacher's purse left in an unattended classroom. Tyke is trying to return the money before the teacher realises it is missing. Quicke refers to Danny's behaviour as a form of kleptomania, which strikes me as odd, but he acknowledges that other vaguely defined disabilities or impairments may be present (p.76). Danny struggles to contain his feelings on several occasions and lashes out (as does Tyke). Danny has a speech impediment too, and Tyke sometimes 'translates' for him. Readers might not identify Danny's behaviours as showing specific impairments but the book leads us to understand that his behaviours are severe enough for the teachers to think Danny needs specialist teaching in another school. Possibly Danny has learning difficulties.

Tyke is protective of Danny: he wants to cover up the theft and helps Danny cheat on an exam to prevent him being sent to the specialist school. Danny becomes what Lois Keith has described as the 'disabled side-kick' (2001, p.212). Unfortunately this means he is present to show us how the main character functions as a kind and decent person. As a character in his own right Danny has far less to say or do, and is expected to be grateful to Tyke throughout. He does have a happy ending though, as he is shown to 'settle down' under the influence of a new, kind teacher. Arguably this is a something of a compromise for a disability perspective on the tale, as kindness rather than understanding or accommodation is the narrative 'solution' to Danny's behaviours.

The Cereus Blooms at Night

My second text is aimed at adult readers, *The Cereus Blooms at Night* (Shani Mootoo, 2000). The narrating character appears to be a male nurse, Tyler. The story, set in the Caribbean, concerns adults, and when we first meet Tyler he is being mocked by the female staff who are pretending to admire the scarf around his neck:

'Eh-heh!' and she turned to the others and said, 'But it nice, eh? You really know how to look good. What material it is?'

'It is nothing fancy, just a light cotton 'kerchief against the cold.'

'But it suit you well. Is a nice colour! I will have to consult you sometime, yes!' they nodded among themselves... all in the same condescending tone. It was the kind of notice one might shower on a child. But I am not a child.' (pp.14-15)

Turning around this situation of rejection Tyler offers to help the other nurses with their clothing choices, and later Tyler agrees to take on the care of a new patient who terrifies the other staff. Mala Ramchandin is an old lady who will not speak and is rumored to be a murderer. She arrives strapped to her bed. Here the gender fluid character that is Nurse Tyler is paired with the speechless 'monster' who is Mala Ramchandin.

Initially Tyler reads as a possible gay male character but by the end of the book the reader sees that Tyler is closer to a male-to-female trans* person. None of these terms are deployed, all is conjecture based upon the actions and emotions of the characters portrayed. At the end of the book we meet another character, Otoh, who is presented as a female-to-male person. Otoh's mother is attempting to marry Otoh off but realizes that her daughter has become a son. The mother wants to be sure that any girl Otoh might marry will be fully aware of the facts of Otoh's body, but otherwise she is non-judgmental. The scene is depicted in an affectionate and warm fashion. What is amusing at this point is that Otoh's mother wants to set up an engagement herself by speaking to a prospective girl's mother. Otoh is as embarrassed by his mother's possible meddling as any young man might be (pp. 237-238). Any laughter here is directed at the busybody

mother rather than at Otoh, and Mootoo's light touch in writing the scene is a surprise and a delight.

The bulk of *Cereus* is 'mad' Mala Ramchandin's story: she finds a way to speak to Tyler and we learn her story of childhood abuse, an alcoholic father, a mother who runs away with another woman, and Mala's own acts of violence made in order to survive. Nurse Tyler narrates and draws out Mala's story but is arguably a secondary character. Yet the author tops and tails *Cereus* with the two trans* characters, Tyler and Otoh. In this way the 'disabled side-kick' trope of the previous book is reversed: Mala is the disabled protagonist and Tyler is her associate/ carer/ friend or trans* side-kick. As with disabled characters in fiction, we usually only meet trans* characters in isolation, as 'the only one of their kind' and as objects of pity or horror. So, whilst this novel may not *primarily* be a trans story, because of the infrequency of such characters in fiction, their positive depiction here, and the fact that both Tyler and Otoh are present, it is a significant novel.

There is one other commonality between these two novels: they achieve endings where the transgressive characters (both trans* and disabled) do not have to change or conform to the mainstream in order to succeed. Given the prevalence of 'kill or cure' endings in many forms of disability narrative, this is note-worthy.

Summing Up and the Future

The two selected books do focus on the youthful years of the trans* character. Although Tyke is a child, we may imagine the onset of puberty soon. The teen years are already viewed as years of transition and films, soaps and books do focus on a trans* person's life at this time in a way that is disproportionate to their overall life experience. Tyler and Otoh are youthful too. The perceived period of identity decision-making and treatment, and the young adult years of searching for work or a life-partner, which we might call 'the narrative of transition', is often chosen as the setting for drama. This has parallels with early representations of lesbian and gay characters which used to be restricted to 'coming out' stories in the characters' teens or early twenties, whilst other life experiences and life stages were neglected by writers.

This might change in the future. We do now have novels, plays and films that allow lesbian, gay and bisexual characters to move beyond coming out narratives. The *Tales of the City* series of books introduced Anna Madrigal, a MtF woman in the first book in 1978. In 2007 the book series' characters were joined by Jake Greenleaf, a FtM character. The 1994 film *Priscilla Queen of the Desert*, though best known for its flamboyant drag queens, had a third character, Bernadette: a quiet transsexual woman mourning the death of her husband. A different narrative from usual and at a different end of the age spectrum. Likewise the 2005 film, *Transamerica*, told a story that does not sensationalise

Bree, the transsexual woman protagonist. Bree discovers she created a son seventeen years ago who is now in trouble with the law, and the movie builds a road-movie structure around this premise. In many ways it is the son who becomes the exotic character rather than Bree.

In terms of allowing characters to own their trans* or disabled status as ordinary, one recent example is the character Walter 'Flynn' White Jr in the TV series *Breaking Bad* (2008 – 2013). He was played by an actor with cerebral palsy and the character's disability was not written as either a plot device or as a metaphor. This is also now the case in several UK soap operas where several disabled actors have joined the casts of long-running soaps.

One could still argue that these recent films and the *Tales of the City* novels do continue the 'odd couple' or 'ragtag bag of misfits' authorial strategies. There is still a high degree of shock and exposure tropes featured, but the exposure occurs early on and is not necessarily the hook upon which the plot depends. These recent stories are certainly an improvement on the older demonization and victim stories.

Why the chosen authors buddy their trans* protagonist with a character with a disability I can only speculate over. It is notable that the disabled character may echo the protagonist's path in the way that they are not forcibly altered to earn acceptance, and are usually brought in from the social margins in some capacity by the book's close. So, story-shadowing as a side-kick might be a literary rationale. It is my hypothesis that the authors of these books enjoy creating the links between transgressive, or anomalous, experiences even when they are not explicit about this they are perhaps making an intuitive link. In real life, of course, these friendships might not occur so easily, but it is nice to think that they could. We need now to see trans* characters broach genres beyond horror, sentiment and true-life drama and move beyond narratives of transition. A story needs a crisis but the crisis need not be the character's gender fluidity or impairment. For example, why not have a low-key male-to-female trans* police officer on a cop show, or a female-to-male trans* doctor on a show such as *Casualty* or *ER*, just as we now have disabled actors playing characters on various soaps? I hope in the future we will also see a greater variety of books featuring both trans* and disabled characters who will have more various adventures than previously allowed.

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Editor's note: cis-gender is commonly used to describe a person whose self-identity corresponds to the gender they were assigned at birth. For more information see B Altman, (2014) *Cisgender*.

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