ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The Rise and Fall of "Tranny" in Australia

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Language around gender diversity is constantly evolving. Terms that previously were markers of pride are now slurs, while other words coined by the medical profession and used for decades are now considered offensive. Yet, identity is something very personal, and there are many trans people who still self-identify with older terms. They are wary of younger trans people who may police identity, exacerbating a perceived generation gap among trans people. Trans debates over language are less about reclaiming slurs, and more about what happens when previously acceptable words go out of fashion and become offensive. This article explores some of the changing terminology involving trans people in Australia. Drawing on oral history interviews, observations, interactions, media, and archival records, it focuses especially on the word "tranny." That term is now considered one of the most offensive words someone can call a trans person. In the 1990s, though, the word was a marker of pride, and one which some older trans people continue to use. This article explores the changing position of "tranny" and other words within the trans community. It poses some reflections about how the loss of historical context hinders communication across generations.

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> Tranny: Once a self-applied term used within trans communities to signal familiarity, comfort, casualness, informality, affection, and insiderness, many younger trans people now consider it a disparaging term that is most often used by cisgender people to ridicule, trivialize, or sexualize transgender people, particularly trans women. There is a strong generational difference of opinion about the use of the word, with older trans people still preferring to use it—albeit no longer in public discourse, and usually out of earshot of censorious young people. (Stryker 2017, 35)

I want to start this article by sharing two stories of encounters I had while conducting research for a recently completed Australian Research Council funded project on Australian transgender history (DP180100322).[1] The first happened early in the project in 2018. I was scheduled to meet with a trans woman in a café near my office to talk about a possible oral history interview. For reasons unknown, I could not access my email at home in the morning. When I arrived at my office and opened Outlook, there was a long string of angry emails overnight. The person had read the participant information letter and had a visceral reaction when she saw that I used the word "transgenderism" in the opening paragraph. She said that this was a word associated with trans exclusionary radical feminists (TERFs; see Pearce, Erikainen, and Vincent 2020). Therefore, I must be a TERF and she did not trust my motives or research. She said she would be at the café until 9:45. If I were not there by then to explain myself, she would leave and cease contact. It was 9:30 when I saw this email.

I ran to the café, where she proceeded to scold me for several minutes. When she finished, I explained that I had no idea that transgenderism was a word associated with TERFs and I apologised for this great error. I also said that I appreciated this learning opportunity because it meant I could change that text and ensure that I never used the word again. She said that as someone who was doing research in this space, I should have known—and she had a point. She directed me to the *GLAAD Media Reference Guide* (GLAAD 2022), which lists transgenderism among the expressions to avoid.

From our discussion, the person could see this was a genuine mistake and our conversation turned positive. I explained that I used transgenderism because it is a noun whereas transgender is an adjective (I now know transness is a more appropriate noun denoting the state of being trans). Honestly, I used the word for grammatical reasons. Furthermore, I did not know it was offensive because a popular scholarly journal was called the *International Journal of Transgenderism*, and nobody else I had interviewed said anything about the word transgenderism. Tracing the etymology of the word transgender, archives scholars K.J. Rawson and Cristan Williams (2014) note that trans pioneer Virginia Prince used "transgenderist" in 1978. In the early 1990s Prince even sought credit for coining "transgenderism" and related terms. Australian activists and other trans people used the word in the 1990s. Later in my research I came across a document from a trans group in Aotearoa New Zealand which used the word as early as 1978 (Hedesthia 1978).

Later, I asked a few of my trans informants who had been longstanding activists what they knew about the word transgenderism. Most did not find the word offensive, but one directed me to Sheila Jeffreys' (2014) anti-trans book *Gender Hurts: A Feminist Analysis of the Politics of Transgenderism*. That book is what reshaped the meaning of the word transgenderism from simply a noun which referred to the state of being transgender, to defining transgenderism as an ideology and political movement (supposedly) invented by men to deny sex difference and which is harmful to women. In the wake of Jeffreys' book, transgenderism rapidly changed from a word which affirmed gender diversity to one that denies the very existence of trans people. Incidentally, in 2020 the aforementioned journal changed its name to the *International Journal of Transgender Health*.

1 Readers are advised that this article includes language about trans and gender diverse people that is now generally considered outdated and offensive.

My other story is more recent. In April 2023 I was working with the Gender Centre and Sex Workers Outreach Project (SWOP) in Sydney to run a focus group with trans elders to discuss their historical experiences of hate crimes. The Gender Centre is Australia's longest running trans support and advocacy group, first founded in 1983. SWOP, founded in 1990 as the successor to the Australian Prostitutes Collective, is the main sex workers union in New South Wales (NSW), Australia's most populous state (Riseman 2023b, 92–103). I conducted this work to prepare a report and submission (Riseman 2023a) to the NSW Special Commission of Inquiry into LGBTIQ Hate Crimes. The NSW government set up this inquiry in April 2022 to investigate the perpetration of, and police responses to, hate crimes against LGBTQI+ people between 1970 and 2010. The commission had received numerous submissions by cisgender gay men and lesbians, but staff were having difficulty reaching trans communities. The Gender Centre, SWOP, and I brought together community elders as part of a community engagement project to fill this substantial gap about historical trans experiences of hate crimes.

Early in the focus group, one participant used the word "trannies" to describe herself and the other trans sex workers who worked in the 1980s/1990s around Premier Lane and William Street in Sydney. She then stopped herself, realising she had used a word that is now considered a slur. Nobody said anything, and very quickly the other participants were all using "tranny" to describe themselves and others. For this community of older trans women, the word tranny was not only unproblematic—it was how they identified. Still, the hesitancy the first person showed was an indicator that they were worried about negative reactions. They had to ensure that they were in a safe space to use the word.

Going through the history of trans people in Australia, the word tranny appears a lot, especially in the 1990s. Moreover, several of the people I interviewed used the word to describe themselves or other trans people. This included Australia's most prominent trans activist, Roberta Perkins (see Riseman 2023b, 97–102), whom I interviewed a few months before her untimely death. In this article I go through that history in more detail, tracing the rise of the word tranny as a source of pride in 1990s Australia and then trying to pinpoint when and why it turned into a slur. I also make some broader observations about the effects of changing language on the trans community. Although this article focuses on Australia, much of the analysis will have resonance in other Western, English-speaking countries.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

The evolution of language around gender diversity has been a rapid process, especially in the new millennium. New understandings of gender have always given rise to fresh terms and labels. One intriguing distinction about the debate over tranny is that, unlike more prominent fights over terms like "queer," this is not a historically offensive word being reclaimed (Jones 2023). Rather, it is a word that previously community members used with pride, but now it is considered a slur. Moreover, the move to depathologise transness has led activists to shun other older terms associated with medical models, such as "transsexual" and "transvestite."

Trans writers and scholars in transgender studies have written about the power of language and labels. For many trans people, labels were important for their identities. They gave a sense of connection and knowing that there were others out there "like them" (Riseman 2021a). The literature on the relationships between trans language, identity, and labels focuses primarily on two related issues. The first is about language as power to define what it meant to be trans and what came with that power. Philosopher Michel Foucault (1990) uses the term biopower to describe the way that labels, definitions, and the discourses that surround them can contain people within boundaries of who does, and who does not, fit the identity category. Until the 1990s, it was primarily doctors—especially psychiatrists—who wielded the power to define transness and the "criteria" someone needed to be trans.

David Valentine (2007) explores the ethnography of the term "transgender" and how it emerged in the 1990s. Transgender was a malleable identity which challenged medical power (and language), while also seeking to unite various groups of gender nonconforming people. Transgender as a label became entwined with activism around recognition, rights, and liberation for those who identified and lived in a gender different from their sex assigned at birth. This links to the second relevant line of scholarly research in transgender studies: exclusion in language. Building on Foucault's points about biopower: by defining, we inherently exclude. Even as activists intended for transgender to be an umbrella term, it did not necessarily resonate with people of colour or those living on the margins like sex workers (Valentine 2007). More recent scholars have extended this critique, showing the ways that transgender reproduces ideas of whiteness, and how white constructions of transgender or transness do not translate to, and therefore may disempower, other genders or identities in the Global South (Dutta and Roy 2014; Jarrín 2016).

The historical evolution and debates over tranny are different from these other examples. Notwithstanding the aforementioned shortcomings, the evolution of language has, for the most part, been about *trying* to be more inclusive. There is less research on how the (supposedly) more inclusive terms have come at the expense or rejection of older terms and those who identify with them. Indeed, Valentine (2007, 103) observed that "the imagined community is an imagining of one group, where other putative members might *not* imagine themselves as belonging to such a community, or might not even know that such a community exists."

Philosopher Katherine Jenkins uses the expression "ontic injustice" to describe this phenomenon when:

> social kinds [categories/labels] can be such that individuals who are socially constructed as members of those kinds can be wronged by the very fact of being socially constructed in that way. I term this form of wrong "ontic injustice": ontic because the wrong operates through social ontology, and injustice because the wrong is a consequence of our collective social arrangements. (Jenkins 2023, 15)

As this article will show, the evolution and debates over the word tranny represent multiple forms of ontic injustice. For those who find the word offensive, to be labelled or grouped with tranny is ontic injustice. For those who identify with the word, being *denied* the right to use it represents ontic injustice. What fundamentally lies beneath people's clinging to various labels is a fear of erasure.

The contemporary debate over tranny and trans language and identities more broadly exposes a generation gap—or often a *perceived* generation gap. Understanding the different meanings attached to identity labels and how and why they have changed over time can help to bridge that generation gap and affirm a model of what Surya Monro and Janneke Van Der Ros call gender pluralism: creating space for new identity categories while not erasing old labels, and celebrating a broad spectrum of genders that supports all trans people's identities (Monro 2005, 86–88; Monro and Van Der Ros 2018, 72).

Although conceptually this article contributes to transgender studies, methodologically this is a history article. The main sources are a mix of oral histories conducted with 104 trans Australians between 2017 and 2022, media reports from both the mainstream and LGBTQI+ press, personal archives kept by trans interview participants, and other government and archival sources. The oral histories were with a mix of trans activists, past and present, and "ordinary" trans folk. I recruited interview participants through a variety of means. I invited representatives from trans organisations in every state and territory onto a project advisory group. They generously suggested people to interview and sometimes facilitated introductions. Snowballing proved effective for the rest of the interviews, as so many participants connected me to other trans people, especially fellow activists. I also worked with the support of the administrator of the Facebook group Sistergirls & Brotherboys + Gender Diverse Mob to recruit Blak, Indigenous, and people of colour. All interview participants had the option to be identified or given a pseudonym; those with a pseudonym are in quotation marks. Interview participants also had the choice of whether their interviews would be deposited in a designated archive. I am pleased that all participants agreed to this. Copies of the interviews and transcripts are accessible at the Australian Queer Archives (AQuA) in Melbourne.

Most of the press coverage comes from material kept in personal archives, mainstream newspaper databases, and from the holdings of AQuA. I have written elsewhere about the value of personal archives as sources for trans history (Riseman 2022c). Some of the sources from personal archives include scrapbooks with newspaper clippings, copies of the Gender Centre's quarterly magazine *Polaré* from 1994 to 2000, and select issues continuing until 2005. I scanned *Polaré* issues and other scrapbook clippings with text recognition capability and searched for the terms "tranny," "trany," and "trannie" (as well as plural forms). AQuA contains comprehensive catalogues of the Australian LGBTQI+ press since the 1970s. They have complete collections of more prominent weekly publications from the 1980s to the 2010s like the *Sydney Star Observer*, *Brother-Sister*, *Lesbians on the Loose* (*LOTL*), and *Capital Q*. These weekly publications and others are all searchable online through the Archives of Sexuality and Gender database. I conducted keyword searches for terms like "tranny," "trany," and "trannie" (as well as plural forms). I also searched the Archives of Sexuality and Gender's international LGBTQI+ media for those keywords. Finally, I used newspaper database Factiva to search mainstream Australian newspapers as far back as 1988. As explained in the next section, I did not find any references to "tranny" in the mainstream press.

"TRANNY" AS A MARKER OF PRIDE (1970S–1990S)

From the 1970s to the 1990s, the mainstream Australian press, women's interest magazines like *Cleo* and *Woman's Day*, and tabloid publications like *Australasian Post* regularly featured stories about trans people. Often, they contained headlines designed to shock and mock, with the expression "sex swap" a common moniker (King 1993, 101–09; Riseman 2021a). Absent in all of these articles is the word tranny; nor does the word appear in the gay and lesbian press in Australia or internationally for much of this period. There is one notable exception: a 1977 article in *The Bulletin* political magazine noted that the Melbourne chapter of Gay Liberation had voted American tennis player Renée Richards as "Tranny of the Year" (Saw 1977, 22).

This early reference gives clout to a hypothesis: the word tranny may have emerged in Australia. Australians have a linguistic propensity for abbreviating words with a -y/-ie or -o on the end (Moore 2014, 90–91). For example, Australians call a tradesperson a tradie and shorten breakfast to brekkie. The Oxford English Dictionary's (2024) earliest recorded use of tranny is from 1979—two years after Melbourne Gay Liberation. The first references to tranny in Australia's gay and lesbian press are from 1987 and 1988 in the classifieds. It appears first in an advertisement for an escort service called "Transsexuals Sydney" (*Campaign Australia* 1987, 70), then in some of the personal ads (*Outrage* 1988, 33). Globally, it would take time before tranny became more common.

The 1990s marked a global change in language about trans people. Activists pushed to depathologise transness and to adopt more inclusive, social constructivist understandings of gender. Sandy Stone's essay "The *Empire* Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto" (1991) became a global manifesto against medicalisation (Plemons and Straayer 2018, 164). Leslie Feinberg's *Transgender Liberation: A Movement Whose Time Has Come* (1992) inspired activists to use transgender as an umbrella term for anyone who identified with a gender other than their sex assigned at birth. Indeed, activists in Brisbane, Sydney, and then Melbourne began using "transgender" rather than "transsexual" or "transvestite" in their organisation names as early as 1992 (Riseman 2023, 129–30). Accompanying this language shift was the rise of tranny among trans activists. One early example is an August 1991 article published in Toronto's *Quota Magazine* titled "The Experiences of a Lesbian Transexual." The author expressed distaste for clinical terms like transsexual, gender dysphoria, and gender reassignment. Instead, they asserted: "How about 'transie' or 'trannie'? Has a nice ring to it, don't you think?" (Thompson 1991, 6). This Canadian commentary marked a rare appearance of the word in the international LGBTQI+ press.

Only in Australia did activists and the LGBTQI+ press commonly use tranny in the early 1990s. For instance, over a six-month period from 1993 to 1994, the Sydney-based activist group Transgender Liberation Coalition ran the Trany Anti-Violence Project.[2] This group recorded and documented experiences of hate crimes perpetrated against trans people.[3] Transgender Liberation Coalition activists Aidy Griffin and Norrie regularly wrote columns in the LGBTQI+ publications *Capital Q* and *Sydney Star Observer*

2 "DRAFT Trany Anti-Violence Pilot Project Report," unpublished manuscript, 1994, courtesy of Shan Short.

3 Shan Short, interview with author, Zoom, April 30, 2021.

which used tranny in the headlines and text. In a 1993 article headlined "Trany Pride," Norrie wrote: "There are many things that make us tranys special because we are tranys, because we are who we are, not people of fixed and unchanged single gender… And taking a bit of pride in ourselves as tranys sure beats the old sad low self esteem—'Oh God I hope they don't find out'—shame system" (Welby 1993, 22). Tranny also commonly appeared in the Gender Centre quarterly magazine *Polare* throughout the 1990s. The magazine featured regular advertisements like "Tranny Pride is… Community… let's talk about it" and "Tranny Pride is… Growing… let's talk about it" (*Polare* 1995a, 5; 1995b, 5). An article called "You're a Tranny and you're Beautiful!" was just one example of community members using the term to express empowerment (Val 1995, 16–17).

Norrie took the expression to new heights in 1995 when they organised a Trany Pride float in the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras. To raise funds for the project, in December 1994 Norrie and longstanding Māori trans public figure Carmen Rupe (Rupe and Paul 1988) organised the first Trany Pride Ball at Les Girls Nightclub. They marketed this in the LGBTQI+ press as "T.L.C. [Transgender Liberation Coalition], the Gender Centre, Carmen, Norrie-May Welby and a bunch of other tranys and friends present the 1994 Trany Pride Ball" (*Sydney Star Observer* 1994).[4] The Mardi Gras float was a glamourous globe in silver foil to look like a mirror ball, called "Tranny Planet." Transgender Liberation Coalition activist Jesse (AKA Jill) Hooley said of the float: "It confirms that Sydney tranys are leading the world in asserting their rights, in resisting gender bigotry and prejudice, and offering new solutions to the restrictive gender regime our society operates" (Griffin 1995, 7; *Polare* 1995a, 22).

Jesse was positioning tranny pride amidst a brewing battle that was going on within Sydney's trans community over what it meant to be trans. Activists affiliated with the Transgender Liberation Coalition were challenging the medical model of transsexualism which ascribed to binary readings of gender. Under this model, doctors expected "true transsexuals" to go on gender affirming hormones, have gender affirmation surgery, and disappear quietly into society. Transgender Liberation Coalition activists adopted queer theory and social constructivist ideas of gender as espoused by Judith Butler (2007), arguing that gender was not fixed. They (re)conceptualised transgender as an umbrella which encompassed anyone expressing gender different from their sex assigned at birth, regardless of medical or surgical interventions. "Tranny" became a word intricately tied with their push to challenge dominant constructs of gender as embodied and binary. They used tranny as a term of empowerment.

In 1995–1996, the Transgender Liberation Coalition clashed with rival organisation the Transsexual Action Group over whether anti-discrimination and birth certificate reforms in NSW should be restricted only to those who had gender affirmation surgery. On anti-discrimination, the Transgender Liberation Coalition won and NSW law protected any trans person regardless of medical and surgical interventions; on birth certificates, the Transsexual Action Group got their way and only those who had gender affirmation surgery could change the sex marker on their birth certificates (Riseman 2022b, 326–33; 2023b, 116–19).

Later in 1996, the Transgender Liberation Coalition clashed with the Gender Centre management committee in a period known colloquially as the "Tranny Wars."

4 Norrie, interview with author, Sydney, Australia, September 10, 2019.

Transgender Liberation Coalition activists wanted the Gender Centre to shift away from promoting the medical model of transsexualism and to institute an affirmative action policy to hire trans employees. The fights between the activists and management committee played out in *Polare*, the LGBTQI+ press, LGBTQI+ venues, and letters to politicians. Eventually the fight came to a head at a dramatic annual general meeting in September 1996. The debate was so heated that convenors ended the meeting early. They then came to a peace deal with the Transgender Liberation Coalition members, agreeing on a set of voting rules for the new management committee under the condition that Norrie did not run. At the reconvened annual general meeting, Transgender Liberation Coalition candidates won two seats, an independent aligned with them won one, and old management committee-aligned members won three seats. The final position was a tie, so the winner had to be drawn out of a hat. The final seat went to Nadine Stransen, a Transgender Liberation Coalition member. Their group essentially won the Tranny Wars. From 1997, under the leadership of Elizabeth Riley, peace came to the Gender Centre and the intra-community politics settled down (Riseman 2022a, 40–49; 2023b, 209–14).

The word tranny continued to be mainstream, regularly appearing in headlines in the LGBTQI+ press through the end of the decade. Moreover, the Gender Centre continued to run the Tranny Pride Ball as an annual event through at least 2005 (*Polare* 2006, 9). Tranny was more widespread than just Sydney and the Gender Centre. Melbourne-based activist Anna Langley in 1995 prepared "The Good Tranny Guide"—thirteen pages of trans-friendly support groups, counsellors, shops, health practitioners, cafes, speech pathologists, and beauticians from across Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand (Langley 1995).[5] In 2001, Adrian Barnes set up an online discussion forum for trans Australians and called it Trannyradio. In 2011, by which time tranny as a slur had taken root, Adrian changed its name to TgR (Barnes 2022, 66–71).[6] As late as 2006 the Canberra-based trans organisation A Gender Agenda had a visual display at SpringOUT Festival called "Tranny Pride."[7] Australian LGBTQI+ media commonly used tranny in headlines and news reports.

The mainstream press tended to avoid the word except when quoting from trans informants. This likely reflects the fact that the word tranny was still slang. The mainstream media stuck to the more formal transgender or transsexual. Internationally, tranny appeared with much less frequency than in Australia. It was more in vogue by the late 1990s, with examples like the Thursday night party Tranny Chaser in a New York bar (Valentine 2007, 140), San Francisco-based drag and cabaret party Trannyshack started in 1996, and Tranny Fest—the world's first transgender film festival—founded in 1997 (Heklina 2015, 142–43; San Francisco Transgender Film Festival 2023).

THE DECLINE OF "TRANNY" (2000S–2010S)

The decline of tranny in the Australian LGBTQI+ press began in the early to mid-2000s. One of the last times the word featured in the news was in 2003 when the organisers of

5 Anna Langley, interview with author, Cambridge, Great Britain, March 17, 2019.

6 Adrian Barnes, interview with author, Sydney, Australia, December 16, 2021.

7 Peter Hyndal, *A Gender Agenda's "Tranny Pride" Display at SpringOUT Festival*, 2006, photograph.

a festival called Lesfest attempted to bar trans women from attending the women-only event. This sparked an anti-discrimination case in Victoria—which the trans women eventually won—as well as a series of letters to the editor in LGBTQI+ publications (Riseman 2021b, 34; 2023b, 219–10). It is noticeable that most of the letter-writers were cis women. They were using tranny not in a pejorative sense per se, but not in an affirming manner either (le Plastrier 2003, 4; *Lesbians on the Loose* 2003, 6). For the rest of the 2000s, some columnists casually used tranny in their writings, though not as frequently as in the 1990s. The word rarely appeared in news items or headlines. Moreover, these were cis writers.

Two cases from 2010 and 2012 mark a clear denotation of tranny no longer as a source of pride, but rather as a slur. In late 2009, DJs at Brisbane's NOVA radio station broadcast several jokes about trans people. One gag was a long story told by a Brisbane Broncos rugby league player who was a guest. He described meeting two "trannies" in a bar in the United States and how he supposedly "saved" a guy from going home with them. In early 2010, *Queensland Pride* revealed that the Australian Transgender Support Association of Queensland—Brisbane's main trans advocacy and support organisation—lodged a complaint with the Queensland Anti-Discrimination Commission. Another trans woman also made a complaint to the regulator, the Australian Communications and Media Authority. At first the DJs claimed that that the trans community did not have a sense of humour, but eventually they apologised (Hackney 2010a, 3; 2010b, 4). The reports were ambiguous about whether the term tranny was itself part of the complaints, but it was clear that these cis DJs were using the term pejoratively.

The other example is from 2012 when gay cabaret star Trevor Ashley planned to launch a new show that he called "trAnnie"—a satire of the musical *Annie*. Members of the trans community complained in the LGBTQI+ media that the use of the word tranny was transphobic (Sutton 2013, 12; 2012, 10). One letter to the editor published in *Queensland Pride* stated:

> As the president of a non profit trans group, I am outraged at another case of the drag crowd (gay men) thinking it's funny to make a joke about my life. "Tranny" a light hearted word? Or is [it] the N word of the T community and needs to be expunged from the lexicon of terminology. What if the transsexuals started calling drag reviews "faggot fest", what's the big deal? They call themselves faggot all the time so why can't we? See, it doesn't matter whether or not YOU think it's offensive, it's about the offended party's reasons. (Carol 2012, 6)

Another letter published in the same issue reinforced an important point about discrimination: it was not a matter of whether the person who used the word *intended* to discriminate, but rather whether a reasonable person would consider the incident to cause offence.

This is where the use of the word tranny gets complicated because many trans people did and still do use the term. This debate erupted internationally in 2014 after popular American drag queen RuPaul defended the word in a podcast. RuPaul claimed that it was a minority of trans people who found tranny offensive:

> No, it is not the transsexual community. These are fringe people who are looking for story lines to strengthen their identity as victims. That is what we're dealing with. It's not the trans community, because most

> people who are trans have been through hell and high water and they know—they've looked behind the curtain at Oz and went, "Oh, this is all a f**king joke." (Nicholls 2014)

A few trans people echoed RuPaul, such as American author and artist Kate Bornstein. She wrote in her blog:

> I understand "tranny" to be a radical, sex-positive gender identity. Tranny is to trans person as fag is to gay man and dyke is to lesbian. More to the point of agreeing or disagreeing with tranny as a gender identity for oneself: I've been saying since I wrote the book, Gender Outlaw 20 years ago, that the only person who can name our gender identities is ourselves. (Bornstein 2014)

Bornstein's comment aligns with Jenkins' concept of ontic injustice: she wished to define her own social kind rather than be assigned (or denied) one.

Notwithstanding such defences of the word tranny, it was not just fringe or conservative people who found the word offensive. Divisions within the Australian trans community over tranny briefly appeared in the alternative media in 2014. Trans activist Indiana Kelly Edwards launched a petition calling for the popular event "Tranny Bingo" to change its name. Norrie came out in defence of the word tranny, arguing:

> I think it's a wonderfully inclusive word, because it's not clear whether it's short for transvestite or transsexual or transgender. I know these are very different kinds of people but when you try to draw the line between them, that causes problems. Many people move from one to the other and I like the idea of not drawing the lines and allowing there to be that space for anyone that transgresses sex or gender. (Gregoire 2014)

Edwards retorted that there was a direct link between the word tranny and violence. She explained: "When people use words like *tranny*, it's not in an endearing way. It's usually a precursor to violence, vilification or discrimination" (Gregoire 2014). Longstanding trans advocate, author, and Gender Centre employee Katherine Cummings expressed a more nuanced position that settled primarily around self-identification. She noted that although she did not like the word herself, "Norrie is entitled to use the term proudly, having had the energy and commitment to take on the establishment and achieve a revision of the law" (Gregoire 2014).

The nail in the coffin of the word tranny being used in Australian popular discourse came in 2017. Trans advocate Katherine Wolfgramme hired lawyers who sent letters to sixteen pubs in NSW and the Australian Capital Territory which were still hosting Tranny Bingo or other events with tranny in the title. Katherine threatened to lodge an anti-discrimination claim in the Australian Human Rights Commission if they did not cease using the offensive term. The organisers of Tranny Bingo relented and agreed to change the name, though they also claimed they were already in the process of doing so and wished there had not been the threat of litigation. Katherine credits this action as having ripple effects. Discussions in the LGBTQI+ press and social media highlighted the issue across the country. Subsequently, organisers of tranny bingo in other states and territories, too, changed the name (Jones 2017).[8]

8 Katherine Wolfgramme, interview with author, Zoom, June 2, 2022.

GENERATION GAPS AND "TRANNY"

The events of recent years reflect a growing consensus that tranny is too often a pejorative slur. British writer Roz Kaveney explained:

> For a while, it seemed as if some younger trans men were going to successfully reclaim "tranny", at least as a "smile when you say that" epithet, or a "we can say that about ourselves; you can't" in-group word like "queer." It didn't take, though, partly because it had never stopped being used by would-be hip lad journalists to abuse not only actual trans people, but a list of "weird" people seen as non-gender-conforming. (Kaveney 2010)

It is interesting that Kaveney framed tranny as if it were always a slur, making this a debate about whether it should be reclaimed. This interpretation overlooked the history of tranny as already existing within the community as a sign of empowerment. Kaveney's reading of the word also represented a new dominant narrative about the debate: to reclaim or not to reclaim, with the implication that there was a generational difference over the word.

Kaveney's assessment about generation gaps is apt. In the case of tranny—not to mention other terms like "transsexual" and "transvestite"—younger people tend to reject these words while *some* older people continue to use them. Oral histories suggest that this has a lot to do with older trans people's living experiences struggling with their gender identity, the relief of finding a word that explained their experiences, and the sense of connection to words which described others like them. Based on oral history interviews, age is the primary axis of division over the word tranny. In Australia, older white, Blak, Indigenous, and people of colour all used the word. Indeed, the person in the focus group I described in the introduction who used the word is a Sistergirl. Most of the other attendees were also Blak, Indigenous, or people of colour. People from middle- and working-class backgrounds, including professionals and former sex workers, used the word. In Australia, the word transcended the politics of respectability versus liberation. The only noticeable group who did not use the word in oral histories were trans men. It is not clear if this represented them consciously rejecting tranny as a slur, associating the word with trans women, or simply reflected their use of contemporary language.

The generation gap is not just about the words people use for themselves. It is also about how others react when older trans people use the outdated terms and people's sense of safety (or lack thereof) within the trans community. "Rainbow policing," as my friend Andrew calls it, is an expression that refers to how people within the LGBTQI+ community become the arbiters of what language is and is not allowed and challenge others' terminology in public or semi-public forums. Rainbow policing represents a form of ontic injustice by denying people's right to particular social kinds. Valentine (2007, 229) also uses the expression "representational violence" to describe how the application (or, in this case, denial) of labels can force people's lives and identities into social categories/kinds with which they do not identify.

There is, of course, nuance that needs to be considered here. LGBTQI+ people can be just as guilty of using offensive language about others in the community and this should be called out. Moreover, in public forums it is appropriate to promote best practice language. Rainbow policing is different, though. It is primarily about attack-

ing people's self-identities, disregarding their living experiences, or ignoring the importance of language in context. As a form of ontic oppression (Jenkins 2023), one effect of rainbow policing is to silence and disempower. American trans porn star Buck Angel, who toured Australia in 2014, spoke about the tranny debate in an interview published in *Queensland Pride*. His description of the debate aligns with the notion of rainbow policing:

> There's all this stuff about certain words you can and can't use in the trans community, like "trannie" and I think that's unfair because language is changing all the time and why don't you just empower yourself with those words instead, just like we did with the word queer. The problem is when you decide certain words have to be taken away then the people who don't want you to be empowered are empowered. (Angel 2014: 10)

Several older trans interview participants expressed how rainbow policing and ontic injustice have made them turn away from the trans or LGBTQI+ communities because they feel ostracised for expressing themselves. "Susan," for instance, still identifies as a transsexual. She sees the trans community as diverse, and while she has no problem with that, she also thinks there needs to be greater acceptance of difference within that community. She describes witnessing harassment and bullying from younger trans activists who reject her living experience:

> Binary trans people, trans women, have different aspirations, different needs to gender diverse and nonbinary people, and it feels like we should be okay to say that. But if you say that, what's the word online, what do they call us? … Truscum. Or trans-medicalists, they call us. Trans-medicalists… It's like the hate online for medically, surgically transitioned trans women. This perspective of "The only reason you had that done was because society said you needed to have the surgery to be female, so you don't have to now." It's like no, no, no, we still want it. We'll always want it. It's our need. It was suicidal. We need this. They go no, it's okay, we're all the same. Well, no, we're not all the same. The same with cross-dressers. It's like, I know I cross-dressed for so many years, because I had to, but there's a section of the trans community that just wants to cross-dress. For some of them, it is about going out to clubs and sex and fetish. And it's kind of like, well, that's okay, but that's not us. That's not me. That's not my end of the community. So, there's this feeling of being silenced.[9]

Older trans people's complaints about changing language are not just about specific words or expressions. Several express how hard it is to speak just to one part of the trans community without being attacked for not being inclusive. For instance, Andrew Eklund founded FTM Shed in 2013 to support trans men in the state of Victoria. Around 2016, the leadership of the group deliberated whether to open the group to nonbinary people. Andrew supported the move and the change of name to The Shed. Still, he laments a sense of loss over how this has changed the dynamics of the group because of rainbow policing:

9 "Susan," interview with author, Regional Victoria, Australia, January 19, 2022.

> There is a difference between trans men, trans masculine, and gender diverse. And when you try and include gender diversity into even just the Facebook group, you lose something for the trans men. And it's happened. It is less masculine. We aren't allowed to say on a post, "Hi guys, hi mates!" I can't call out to other trans men who are male. I have lost something. And does that matter? Well, it's the evolution of the group, and you can't hold that back. I don't believe you should. The population's changed. But it makes me feel old, and it makes me feel isolated again.[10]

Debates over language are only one example of a generation gap where older trans people often feel that young people do not understand trans people's historical challenges and experiences. Jonathan Paré, one of Victoria's first trans men activists, now avoids being involved in the trans community because he feels so disconnected from the key topics of discussion:

> There's this ongoing experience of, "You're not like us, you're not like us, you're not like us." And then to internalise that, I walk away going, "I don't relate, I don't relate, I don't relate. I'm not talking about binders, I'm not talking about top surgery and I really don't want to talk about phalloplasty. You've asked me my opinion. You've ignored my opinion. You don't want to hear my opinion. Good luck to you. Do whatever you want to do." And, at the end of the day, I've learnt the hard way when someone says, "What do you think?" my response now is, "It doesn't matter what I think because you'll do whatever you want to do and your perspective will be whatever it is, and I don't want to be punished because I actually share my opinion with you."[11]

Similarly, "Bronwyn" expresses:

> I do feel that there is this representation of trans around at the moment which puzzles me. Because I wonder if it's gotten tangled up in radical politics based around the idea of individual freedoms. I was able to choose my own life and have my individual freedom back in the 90s. And I'm puzzled to find that there's a younger subset of people saying they're trans around who are sort of putting it across that it's now so difficult and the world's so against them. I actually find it, myself feeling a bit puzzled about it because I can't equate it to the experience I had back then. And that's, having said that, yes, there was a freak show status attached to the subject years ago, but I see how society has changed. How we now have equal marriage, [and] someone with my background has been able to work in private schools. And I don't, I find there's a disconnect between what I'm hearing coming out of the young, radical trans movement and what my own general life experience, and the experience of a number of other people I've known, and still know, have had as well. I don't quite see where they're coming from, and I wonder if they're not creating some of their problems themselves by painting themselves into such a radical corner.[12]

10 Andrew Eklund, interview with author, Zoom, February 7, 2022.

11 Jonathan Paré, interview with author, Brisbane, Australia, December 10, 2018.

12 "Bronwyn," interview with author, Melbourne, Australia, April 6, 2018.

Whereas Susan, Jonathan, Andrew and Bronwyn responded to intergenerational differences by turning away from community, Katherine Wolfgramme chose to confront those differences head-on. She was an early member of the social group Trans Pride Australia, originally founded in 2015 as Sydney Trans Pride (Riseman 2023b, 249–50; 2022a, 55–56). Katherine recalls that one of the early organisers contacted her because many nonbinary people were joining the online Facebook group and being aggressive and demeaning to trans women members. Katherine became a group administrator and, as she recalls:

> I asked, "I'm an old trans woman and I don't understand what nonbinary means. Can someone please explain to me?" And then they came at me. "Go educate yourself, you uneducated bitch, you dog, you foul dog, how dare you ask me? How dare you question my existence?" And you know, probably like 200 of them came at me. It was really quite full-on. So I blocked them all, one by one.[13]

Over time, as Katherine has learned more about nonbinary people, she has come to see them as part of the gender diverse community but as different to other trans people. As she explains it:

> Once I thought about why are they [nonbinary people] feeling misrepresented, [it] is because a nonbinary person isn't talking. It's because a binary person is talking. So, they really do need their own voice. They need their own voices and they need their own letter on the acronym. They need sovereignty because the whole idea of smashing gender binaries is completely the antithesis of a binary transgender person who risk their life and protects the binary that they are bound to.[14]

Social media leaves little room for the sort of nuance that Katherine discussed in her oral history interview. As another example, in 2018 Katherine became the subject of an online storm when she posted in a private Facebook group associated with the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras organisation. As context, a group that calls itself Pride in Protest had been (and still is) agitating for Mardi Gras to return to its radical protest roots. Their most prominent demands are for the elimination of corporations from the parade and banning the participation of police (Jupp 2025). In the build-up to the Mardi Gras annual general meeting, Pride in Protest were agitating for their candidates to win a majority of seats on the board. Katherine posted in a closed Facebook group:

> Many PIP [Pride in Protest] have become non-binary and are trying very hard to take over the trans community to use as a political platform, they have no idea the damage their Queer Theory ideas are causing us and if any transgender person defends themselves they are accused of transphobia and are subject to mass hysteria from this group. (Reeders 2020)

When someone leaked the comment, many LGBTQI+ activists interpreted Katherine's use of the word "become" as a denial of nonbinary existence—in essence another ontic injustice. This was not what Katherine said, though. She is adamant in her

13 Wolfgramme, interview.

14 Wolfgramme, interview.

affirmation of nonbinary people's existence. She was pointing to a particular cohort whom, she argues, "were pretending to be nonbinary so that they could get their hands on the trans things, the concerns from the government about trans people and you know."[15] Essentially, Katherine saw a particular group of people who asserted that they were nonbinary and therefore spoke for the entire trans community, when there were quite diverse identities, perspectives, and opinions within the community. Katherine faced pressure to resign from numerous boards, including a role as an associate board member of the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras. She says that the younger activists "cancelled" her.[16]

These examples are not specifically about the tranny debate. Rather, they highlight the broader generation-divide context in which this debate operates. One fear that Susan, Jonathan, Andrew and other interview participants expressed was of being erased. Moreover, they feared that the proliferation of new gender identities and changing language also meant that their own identities were being erased. Daniel Reeders' blog essay about the controversy over Katherine Wolfgramme also acknowledges this:

> Older trans folk grew up in a different time and have had different experiences, through which they have developed their own distinctive culture and politics. They fear losing that distinctiveness as younger people join the queer community and the trans movement with different understandings, experiences and identities… I don't agree that non-binary people are "taking over," but I can certainly understand where that concern is coming from. (Reeders 2020)

Fear of erasure need not be the case, though. Surya Monro's concept of gender pluralism is a useful lens that can bridge the generation gap, or *perceived* generation gap. Monro describes gender pluralism as "conceptualising gender as 'fields' or 'groupings' of—in some cases overlapping—masculinities, femininities, and gender diverse identities" (Monro 2005, 38). Importantly, Monro notes that gender pluralism aims to "create[e] space for the addition of new categories and identities *to those that are already established*, so that a spectrum (or universe) of genders becomes possible" (Monro 2005, 86; emphasis added). The key point about gender pluralism is to add categories without there being any need to take away from what already exists. As this article has shown, it is this final point about not deleting existing categories that needs more sensitivity within the trans and LGBTQI+ communities. A gender pluralism approach thus offers a space to bridge the generation gap through more dialogue, with different generations of trans people learning from each other's living experiences and finding ways to affirm each other in all their diversity.

CONCLUSION

As this article has shown, the word tranny has a long history within Australia's trans community. It originated as an umbrella term and source of pride. In the 1990s it was commonplace in the LGBTQI+ media and popular among activists. At the same time,

15 Wolfgramme, interview.

16 Wolfgramme, interview.

there were cis people who deployed tranny as a slur to attack trans people and perpetrate violence. In the mid-to-late 2000s, in part influenced by overseas rejection of the term, the associations of tranny with violence dominated and the term went out of vogue. This process was organic like all language change. At the same time, it has meant disruption and ontic injustice for people who have attached significant personal meanings to the word as part of their identities. Vocal debates have played out over the appropriateness of tranny; these arguments have underpinned other generational divides, or perceived divides, within trans communities. One way to navigate these debates in a healthy way is to adopt a gender pluralism approach: making room for new and multiple categories of gender while not taking away from existing labels and terminology.

The gender pluralism approach also raises bigger questions for the tranny debate. Can the word tranny be part of a broader gender pluralist lexicon of accepted terms under the trans umbrella? Can trans people reclaim a word that was originally a marker of pride, then became a slur? Valentine's ethnography of transgender highlighted the complexities when activists adopted that label in the 1990s. Valentine was particularly cognisant of the relationship between self, group, community, outsiders, and others. His research highlighted:

> the question of how all of us are responsible for—and subject to—the limits and possibilities of self-making in a broader and stratified political-economic context. The goal is to reveal how the categories we live by—must live by—have histories, politics, and economies and produce effects that can be as debilitating for some as they can be liberating for others. The goal is to question how, why, when, and with what effects self-making is other-making. (Valentine 2007, 246)

Valentine's analysis of the emergence of new labels is just as applicable to the rejection of old terms like tranny. Jenkins, too, cautiously warns that activism and liberation politics designed to challenge oppression may conflict with people who identify strongly with particular social kinds/labels: "Should countering oppression be conceived of as involving a project of dismantling or abolishing race and gender kinds? If so, how can this be reconciled with people's experiences of identification with those kinds? And how should we approach the question of categorising people with regard to these kinds?" (Jenkins 2023, 15–16).

The framings of rainbow policing, gender pluralism, and ontic injustice do not necessarily resolve the tranny debate, but they provide conceptual lenses to apply the history to the present. Indeed, a gender pluralism approach and greater conversations about identity and the meanings people attach to their own labels can also expose how, as Jenkins writes:

> it may turn out that there is no genuine disagreement after all…each kind might be most useful for the relevant set of purposes, and each purpose might be a genuinely valuable one, meaning that there is no real conflict—merely a need to be careful with language to avoid misunderstandings. (Jenkins 2023, 171–72)

It is fitting to close with some reflections from Katherine Wolfgramme about her 2017 lawsuit over Tranny Bingo. Katherine explains that she personally does not find the word tranny offensive, but she knows that many other people in the trans

community do. She has problems with cis people using the word but has no qualms with trans people who use tranny. As she puts it: "So what I did in actual fact was I took a word that was misappropriated. I took it back and I gave it back to the transgender community. Now, what they do with that word is completely up to them."[17]

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17 Wolfgramme, interview.

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