

READING TRANSITION WITH SUSPICION

An Affective Critique of *Umwandlung* in N. O. Body's *Aus eines Mannes Mädchenjahren* and its Reception

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes *Umwandlung* (gendersex transition) as a sexological and autobiographic narrative in “N. O. Body’s” (Karl M. Baer’s) memoir *Aus eines Mannes Mädchenjahren* (1907), one of the first self-authored accounts of an intersex person in modern times. Scholars as well as authors of popular queer and trans genealogies frame Baer’s transition through medical intervention, although the historical evidence suggests otherwise. This discrepancy generates the author’s suspicion, which functions as a reading strategy and an affective methodology. The article pursues two central arguments: Empirically, it argues to de-medicalize *Umwandlung* as an early 20th century concept of transition via the example of Karl M. Baer’s memoir. Methodologically, it reintroduces suspicion to affect theory and proposes “reading with suspicion” as affective strategy to critically engage with trans and intersex narratives. Ultimately, the article argues that a more nuanced, complex and contradictory perspective on *Umwandlung* not only gives new insight into early 20th century intersex and trans history but also offers potential alternatives to contemporary medicalizing concepts of transition. In order to do so, the article proposes an interdisciplinary framework comprised of literary analysis as well as historiographic source study and conceptual history within the fields of trans studies and intersex studies.

Keywords: Intersex history; autobiography; early 20th century sexology; German; transition narratives; Karl M. Baer; Magnus Hirschfeld; critique; post-critique; suspicion

Introduction

Worries and doubts tortured me again and again. What was I really? A man? Oh God, no. That would have been indescribable joy. But miracles no longer happen nowadays (MY 93).¹

In *Aus eines Mannes Mädchenjahren* (*Memoirs of a Man’s Maiden Years*, 1907), author “N. O. Body” – later identified as Karl M. Baer – narrates a fictionalized version of his childhood and coming of age. After the midwife is unsure which gendersex to ascribe to the protagonist, at birth, he is raised a girl.² From early on, his body is marked as “other” through

1 “Sorge und Zweifel quälten mich immer und immer wieder von neuem. Was war ich nun eigentlich? Ein Mann? Ach Gott, nein. Das wäre ein unsagbares Glück gewesen. Aber heute geschehen keine Wunder mehr” (MJ 110). I will quote both the 2022 edition of the memoir in the original German as well as Deborah Simon’s English translation (2009). Going forward, I will reference both editions every time to make it as easy as possible for readers to find each quote in either language. I reference the German edition as MJ (*Mädchenjahren*) and the English one as MY (*Maiden Years*). All translations of other German primary and secondary sources are my own.

2 I use ‘gendersex’ as a literal, conceptual translation of the German *Geschlecht* to question the dichotomous concepts of (biological) sex and (social) gender. Especially for the historical context of this research, a clear-cut separation of

the various reactions from the people around him, ranging from curiosity and amazement to disgust, and he experiences bodily changes throughout puberty unlike any of the girls around him. Throughout his childhood and teenage years, he struggles with the lack of knowledge and communication about his gendersex. Only in his early twenties does a sympathetic doctor present him with the possibility to live as the man he felt to have been all along – the gendersex assigned to him at birth is deemed a mistake (*irrtümliche Geschlechtsbestimmung*). He is now able to go through his transition (*Umwandlung*) and starts to live as a man.³ As it turns out, miracles do happen.

Early 20th century writers produced a number of autobiographic or pseudo-autobiographic literature which followed a narrative of confessing (“sich bekennen”) non-normative gendersex or sexual identities, such as homosexuality or transvestitism (Sutton 2015, 90). Sutton characterizes these works as “performative technologies of the transvestite self” which are centered around a specific narrative of admitting one’s own non-normative sexual or gendersex identity to oneself or to others (Sutton 2015, 92). By telling personal stories, these works aimed to educate: Karl M. Baer frequently steps out of chronological narration to ask mothers to speak openly to their children about gendersex and sexuality (MY 19, 21, 56; MJ 32, 35, 71) and, at the very end of the memoir, states that he wants to contribute to “modern psychology” and is writing “in the interest of science and truth” (MY 108; MJ 126). In his foreword, editor Rudolf

biological and social aspects would be inadequate and linguistically imprecise. I follow Marie-Louise Holm, who uses gendersex as a more adequate translation of the Danish *køn*. See: Holm 2017, 75.

3 I chose to continually refer to the author and the protagonist with he/him pronouns. In the memoir, Baer employs the trope that the protagonist was, even though raised a girl, always a man. No later sources indicate that Baer ever thought otherwise of himself.

Presber claims that he implored Baer to publish the book in order to assist many people with hidden sorrows and help solve many a disastrous riddle among the misunderstood tragedies of everyday life” (Presber in MY, 3; Presber in MJ, 14). It’s quite interesting that Baer’s primary audience are those raising children like him (“mothers”), not the children themselves. Similarly, the author does not seem to be interested in community organizing or legal and political fight for self-determination. He only demands “honest knowledge” (“ehrliches Wissen”) (MY 107; MJ 125), hoping to break the taboo of sexuality and gendersex through a sort of literary, educational activism.

In this article, I will analyze the narrative of *Umwandlung* in Karl M. Baer’s memoir as well as its reception and selected sexological material. Since historian Hermann Simon identified the anonymous author as Karl M. Baer, a writer, social worker and functionary in Berlin’s Jewish institutions, in the 1980s, historians and literature scholars were able to examine the anonymous memoir vis-à-vis other sources documenting his life. His *Umwandlung* and the medical, legal and social practices it might have entailed has received particular attention. So far, scholars of the history of medicine have argued that it is very unlikely that Karl M. Baer underwent surgical procedures (Spörri 2003, 249; Hilger 2016, 244; Hulverscheidt 2022, 180-81). Nonetheless, Baer is sometimes pictured as having received “the first sex change operation in history” (Aderet 2015). As I will later elaborate, this particular perspective on Baer’s work and biography aroused my suspicion. In this paper, I will develop this affective impulse into a methodological framework.

My central argument serves a double aim. Empirically, I propose to de-medicalize early 20th century concepts of transition (*Umwandlung*) via the example of *Aus eines Mannes Mädchenjahren*, disentangling gendersex transition from surgical intervention. Methodologically, I seek

to reincorporate suspicion into affect theory and propose “reading with suspicion” as an affective strategy to critically engage with trans and intersex narratives. Ultimately, I will explore how a more historically nuanced and affectively complex perspective on *Umwandlung* not only gives new insight into early 20th century intersex and trans history but also offers potential alternatives to contemporary medicalizing concepts of transition. As I was confronted with the narrow frameworks of transition as defined by gender-affirming surgeries, I wondered if *Umwandlung* allows for readings beyond medical intervention. In Jay Prosser’s words, I’m interested in exploring transition as “an intermediate nonzone”, an unstable process of movement rather than a single-minded trajectory which is read through the lens of its supposedly final destination, surgical sex-change (Prosser 1998, 3). How, in turn, might a historiographic and literary study of *Umwandlung* and its narrative in Baer’s memoir complexify not only its conceptual history but also contemporary, Western concepts of transition?

This question leads me to analyze *Umwandlung* as narrative across the memoir, its historical-medical context and its reception. I combine historiographic source study, conceptual history and literary analysis in the wider context of trans studies and intersex studies. In order to analyze the narrative of transition in Baer’s memoir and its reception, I develop my suspicion into affective methodology. First, I will situate my methodological approach within critique and post-critique as well as affect theory. Then, I will analyze *Umwandlung* in four steps: first, I will deconstruct *Umwandlung* in connection to medical intervention in the memoir’s reception in reference to the medical history of gender reassignment surgeries in general and Baer’s case studies in particular. While this first step builds on the existing historiography on Baer and the work of medical historians, the second step will tread new ground by tracing *Umwandlung* as concept and narrative in early 20th century German sexology, most notably the work of Magnus Hirschfeld. Third, I will

perform a close-reading of the memoir. Ultimately, I will use my suspicion towards prevailing narratives of *Umwandlung* and the memoir’s reception history as a tool to find alternative, empowering readings.

Reading (transition) with suspicion – theoretical and methodological approach

My initial moment of suspicion in relation to *Aus eines Mannes Mädchenjahren* and its reception was twofold: first, I immediately cringed when I read the term *Geschlechtsumwandlung*, which carries a stereotypical and essentialist meaning that many trans and intersex people today reject. It is inextricably linked to medical intervention, as sex reassignment surgery marks the “magical moment of ‘sex change’” (Prosser 1998, 63). *Geschlechtsumwandlung* shapes a narrative of being trans and intersex that has very little to do with the complexity of trans and intersex experience in terms of identity formation and embodiment and is often used to stigmatize or vilify trans and intersex people, regardless of how they as individuals envision their transition.

Second, I became suspicious when I discovered how Baer is discussed in recent queer and trans genealogies. Here, he is often framed as the first person to undergo gender affirmation surgery. For example, Ofri Aderet refers to Baer in connection to “the first sex change operation in history” in *Haaretz* (Aderet 2015). An online article features Baer and Lili Elbe under the subheading “The World’s First Gender Affirmation Surgeries” (Berlin Guide 2021). Emphasizing this fact in the headline makes it appear as if this detail about Baer’s life is what makes him memorable for queer and trans history.⁴

⁴ In her monograph on Lili Elvenes (Lili Elbe), Sabine Meyer notices a similar tendency. She observes that historiography often aims to establish Elvenes

Trans and intersex histories frequently overlap and certain aspects about Baer's memoir and his life – his transition, his navigation of binary gender roles – can provide insight into trans histories as well. However, I'm suspicious when these overlapping histories are subsumed under a trans umbrella and ignore intersex history. Then, trans writers “not only erase intersex history: we appropriate it” (Heyam 2022, 179).⁵ To our knowledge, Baer never labelled himself a hermaphrodite – which was the most familiar term at the time – in his memoir or elsewhere, he also did not refer to himself as a transvestite.⁶ The point of my research, however, is not to investigate if Karl M. Baer should be reclaimed as intersex, but rather to explore what an analysis of *Umwandlung* can contribute to trans and intersex historiographies and epistemologies of transition.

Theorizing suspicion

Suspicion is hardly a new reading strategy. Ever since Paul Ricoeur's “hermeneutics of suspicion”, suspicious reading has been considered the standard critical method to approach a text. Suspicious readings have also left their mark on queer and feminist literary criticism. Even though suspicious readings might be well-suited to deconstruct gendered narratives and trace queerness across a text and its readings, Rita Felski and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick have also formulated important criticism. Following

as the first person undergoing “documented complete surgical genital transformation”. See: Meyer 2015, 39. It seems like Baer's story fulfills a similar function in transmasculine history.

5 Few genealogies explicitly list Baer as intersex, for example: Lopez 2017; Sienna 2019, 194–202.

6 Magnus Hirschfeld coined the term in 1910, four years after Baer wrote the memoir. Here, it feels important to note that transvestite was a common term in the early 20th century, also used by crossdressers, drag performers, and people who lived in a gendersex different than the one ascribed to them at birth in some or every part of their lives. The term carried a much wider meaning than today. See: Hirschfeld 1917, 140.

Felski, critique is both a “mood” and a “method” and is characterized by modes of questioning, denouncing hegemonic social structures and radical intellectual and political inquiry (Felski 2015, 2). As she states in *The Limits of Critique* (2015), suspicious readings are “negative act[s]”, determined to expose gaps and cracks in the narrative (Felski 2015, 127). Similarly, in her essay “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're so Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is about You” (2003), Sedgwick argues that suspicion centralizes the concept of paranoia (Sedgwick 2003, 125). Both writers also emphasize the role that affect plays in critical reading. Sedgwick conceptualizes paranoia as “a theory of negative affects” (Sedgwick 2003, 136). Felski, in turn, criticizes that suspicious readings don't hold up to their own standards because the analysis is informed by affect – a “mash-up of conflicting parts” (Felski 2015, 118). Critique claims to operate from an “austere, even ascetic, intellectual” position, but – characterized by the satisfaction to reveal and read against the grain – hides its affective nature (Felski 2015, 118).

To summarize, Felski and Sedgwick have criticized suspicious reading as being profoundly negative and affective. For both authors, suspicious readings are not the enemy per se. Both mainly criticize the fact that suspicious readings have become synonymous with critical reading in general (Sedgwick 2003, 126; Felski 2015, 4–5). Therefore, Felski calls to increase the variety of moods and methods. She writes: “Why – even as we extol multiplicity, difference, hybridity – is the affective range of criticism so limited?” (Felski 2015, 13). The critique of critique, therefore, doesn't necessarily dismiss suspicion as a reading strategy – it seeks to establish alternative modes of critical reading.

To dissolve the flaws of critical and suspicious readings, Sedgwick proposes “reparative reading”, while Felski develops a “post-critical” approach. The post-critical reading posits itself not behind, but in front of the text – instead

of destabilizing the text, it is more focused on locating possibilities within it (Felski 2015, 12). In a similar vein, Sedgwick describes her reparative reading as “additive and accretive” (Sedgwick 2003, 149). I will propose to think of critique and post-critique not as dichotomous or exclusionary but rather to fashion a queer methodology by employing different, sometimes contradictory reading strategies together. In their work, Selina Foltinek and Marie-Louise Holm have each opted for a combined approach of critical and post-critical reading strategies. This allows, as Holm explains, for a multiplicity of readings (Holm 2017, 92–93). Employing a variety of reading strategies might also result in a multifaceted, contradictory perspective on the text (Foltinek 2020, 32). Foltinek locates queer potential in this multimodal method because it destabilizes the binary of critical and post-critical readings (Foltinek 2020, 26–27).

As Felski and Sedgwick call to diversify the approaches to critical readings by proposing their reparative and post-critical models, they opt for alternative affective and methodological frameworks rather than developing new angles at suspicion. In her essay, Sedgwick discusses suspicious readings through the framework of paranoia and theorizes the latter through affect (Sedgwick 2003, 136–138). On the one hand, this move to negative affect is meant to illustrate the one-dimensional nature of suspicious readings – paranoia/suspicion is not introduced as an alternative affective framework. On the other hand, Sedgwick theorizes paranoia as affect rather than suspicion. Similarly, Felski’s affective conceptualization of suspicion is limited to the assumption of suspicion as a negative affect (Felski 2015, 118). As Felski criticizes, suspicious readings are instable and ineffective because the affects which inform the reading and the methods are ignored – she describes suspicion as a “non-emotional emotion” (Felski 2011, 220).⁷ But when intentionally conceptualized and taken into

⁷ In her essay “Suspicious Minds”, Felski uses emotion and affect interchangeably.

methodological consideration, can the “mash-up” of the analytical and the affective be a strength rather than a weakness?

Reading with suspicion as an affective methodology

Suspicion does not necessarily disguise subjectivity and affectivity, but can rather help to fashion them into theoretical and methodological tools. In order to create such an intentionally twofold approach, I will reconsider suspicion as affect. While its link to analysis has never been contested by proponents of critique and post-critique alike; its affective qualities, however, have not yet been explored for their theoretical and methodological potential.

What are the affective qualities of suspicion? And how does it relate to intersex and trans histories? Cambridge Dictionary explains “suspicion” as a “feeling or belief that something is likely or true” (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). The Oxford English Dictionary defines suspicion as “imagination or conjecture of the existence of something evil or wrong without proof; apprehension of guilt or fault on slight grounds or without clear evidence” (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.). In one sense, suspicion might serve as a strategy to debunk cissexist and heteronormative readings and historiographies. Intersex studies as well as trans studies both respond to these structures by deconstructing and questioning normative concepts of sex and gender as well as the legal, social and medical structures which produce them (Horlacher 2016, 10). As Ashley Barnwell remarks: “Suspicion drives knowledge; it is the knitting together of seemingly disparate events and utterances into a pattern that can be read and responded to” (Barnwell 2020, 115). The suspicion that intersex and trans experiences are distorted through cissexist, binary and heteronormative historiographies might drive us to look at the sources with a fresh perspective in order to find more nuanced, complex readings and collect

our own knowledges of intersex and trans histories. This dimension of suspicion stands in the tradition of critical readings.

In another way, however, suspicion may also relate to the affective state of the reader, the historian. For me, suspicion is quite often the affective point of departure of my analysis. As an endosex (=non-intersex) genderqueer trans person writing trans and intersex histories, suspicion accompanies me frequently when I wade through swamps of cissexist, heteronormative historiographies on gendersex and sexuality.⁸ It informs the way I read the newspaper or the way I watch the latest TV show featuring a trans character. It guides the questions I ask of historical sources touching on trans and intersex narratives, but, more importantly, it guides my distrust in the reception of these sources. For me, suspicion is an underlying sense of dread, a feeling bordering on knowledge that intersex and trans stories probably will be distorted. I am suspicious of mainstream trans and intersex narratives because I am used to being disappointed, hurt, and infuriated by them. Why wouldn't I approach historical trans and intersex narratives and their discussion in hegemonic historiography in the same way?

Finally, is to read with suspicion the same as performing a suspicious reading? Not necessarily. Although building on the theoretical discourse on critique and post-critique, reading with suspicion is also related to other affective reading strategies: reading with anger, reading with grief and reading with hope. Like all affects, they might spontaneously emerge through our reading and color our first impressions of a text. What if I cannot shake this feeling? In order to avoid replicating the flaws of

⁸ Scholars of trans studies, such as G. M. Bychowski, Alexander Eastwood, and Sam Holmqvist, have explored the affective and intimate connections of trans researchers to their literary, historical projects: Bychowski 2021; Eastwood 2014; Holmqvist 2018. In order to analyze the (re)production of historical narratives of transition, I'm more drawn to epistemological frameworks rather than identity politics, although I of course cannot operate without them entirely.

critical readings, I aim to consciously integrate the affective as well as the critical dimensions of suspicion into my methodology. Such a reciprocal framework transforms suspicion into an affective methodology. The difference between “suspicious readings” and “reading with suspicion” lies precisely in the shift of rethinking suspicion as affect. When suspicion is understood as affect rather than a synonym of (literary) critique, its pedestal is removed. In a way, refocusing on the affective dimensions of suspicion might solve some of the very problems associated with hermeneutics of suspicion: affectivity is consciously introduced into the theoretical and methodological framework rather than hiddenly tainting a seemingly neutral analytical stance. To read with suspicion is a theoretical, methodological and affective impulse among a range of others, not a resort to *the* hegemonic analytical framework. As shown in the last part of my analysis, other affects such as joy or hope become entangled with suspicion. A reading informed by suspicion is therefore not only one of many affective analytical frameworks but in itself contains traces and links to the various affects informing trans and intersex readings.

Selection of sources and analytical methods

The analysis of *Umwandlung* as sexological concept and literary narrative influences the selection of the sources. For this reason, I situate my analysis between history and literary criticism, similar to Eastwood's approach of trans literary history. Eastwood proposes that reading trans history through literary representation “provides accounts of history that are affective, imaginative, and closely linked to questions of self-authorship” (Eastwood 2014, 591). Additionally, literary texts are produced for readers. Studying the memoir from an interdisciplinary angle allows me to consider it both as a historical source which is shaping and shaped by sexological discourses on gendersex in the early 20th century as well as a narrative of transition which seeks to educate and build affective connections to readers. My approach seeks to destabilize the hierarchy of sources that most scholarship

on trans and intersex narratives explicitly or implicitly engages in. Usually, medical documents are attributed higher credibility and impartiality than self-authored accounts such as memoirs or diaries (Meyer 2015, 42). This power dynamic extends until today, when, due to the lack of information available, medical professionals still possess power to decide over an intersex person's medical treatment, including performing non-consensual surgeries in infancy (Creighton et al. 2009, 254). For these reasons, I aim to deeply engage with the memoir and simultaneously study the academic and medical discourses it is embedded in.⁹

Due to the scope of this article, I will study sexological texts closely related to the memoir, such as case studies and research publications by sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld, who wrote a medical report for Karl M. Baer to change his gendersex marker and name and also connected him to editor Rudolf Presber. Additionally, I study reviews written around the time of the memoir's publication, both in medical and non-medical periodicals, to analyze how its readers perceived and wrote about the narrative of transition. I then also analyze the memoir's more recent reception in – mostly academic – historiographies, to investigate how authors (re) produce the interpretation of *Umwandlung* as surgical intervention. While this selection of sources cannot make claims about concepts of gendersex transition in early 20th century sexology at large, I hope to indicate that further investigation of the medical and autobiographic narrative of *Umwandlung* is needed in order to trace its conceptual history and think through similarities and differences in comparison to 21st century narratives of transition.

9 As I will show, turning to the history of medicine is quite useful to shed light on *Umwandlung* as an early 20th century concept. My effort to de-medicalize the narrative does not result in a rejection of any medical narrative or medical theory, but rather questions our supposedly ahistorical and universal 21st century medicalizing frameworks of trans and intersex.

The first step of my initial analysis – and the last in this article – was a close-reading of the memoir. I looked for the term *Umwandlung* as well as motifs of physical and social changes. I then analyzed what purpose these changes serve for the narrative of transition, how different moments might contradict each other and sought to point out gaps or continuity in the narrative as well. Then, I turned to secondary sources. Initially, I analyzed the sources by looking for keywords connected to gendersex transition, for example the article's key term, *Umwandlung*. When this term was absent – as it also is in some passages from Baer's memoir which speak of changes of gendered behavior or gendersex expression – I looked for similar expressions, such as “official change of gendersex” in the review by Georg Merzbach (Merzbach 1908, 101). I also looked for expressions indicating medical intervention or surgery. My initial approach was therefore to reread *Umwandlung* and its medicalized reception into the early sources and point out the gaps and clashes. I then applied a similar method to the more recent reception of the memoir, looking for key terms such as “Geschlechtswandel” (“sex change”) (Simon 1993, 177) or “transgenderation” (Brenner 1998, 32) used to describe, or rather interpret, the protagonist's transition. I then investigated whether the authors make direct or indirect references to medical intervention or surgeries. The analysis of the memoir's reception history is complemented by a selective conceptual history of the early 20th century concept of *Umwandlung*, mostly drawn from Hirschfeld's sexological work. Again, I looked for the term *Umwandlung* in his writings and analyzed which kinds of changes – legal, social, medical etc. – he discussed and how he tied them to gendersex identity. Following the initial moment of suspicion, I'm wondering: how is the narrative of *Umwandlung* connected to medical intervention in the memoir's reception and the historiography on Karl M. Baer?

Umwandlung in Karl M. Baer's memoir and its reception

Reception history and the (re)construction of *Umwandlung*

Apart from queer, trans and – rarely – intersex historiographies, the reception of N.O. Body's/Karl M. Baer's *Aus eines Mannes Mädchenjahren* is comprised of four genres: reviews of the memoir, published after its publication in 1907, the medical and legal documents that allowed Baer to change his name and gendersex marker, the academic scholarship which emerged in the 1990s as well as popular queer and trans genealogies. First, I will address the memoir's more recent, academic reception before I analyze *Umwandlung* as narrative in the early 20th century.

The academic works produced after the memoir's reprint in 1993 are located in three disciplines: history, literature, and history of medicine/sexology. Especially literature scholars like Jana Funke, Ina Linge and Stephanie Hilger take the memoir as a starting point for larger observations about the genre of the memoir or the autobiography, sometimes also in connection to the case study (Funke 2011; Linge 2015; Hilger 2016). Katie Sutton and Marion Hulverscheidt situate the memoir in the history of medicine, specifically German sexology (Sutton 2015; Hulverscheidt 2017, 2022). Michaela Koch contributes to both literary and medical-historical discussions on Baer (Koch 2017a, 2017b). Koch's work is so far unique in that it discusses Baer in the context of intersex theory and activism.

What role does medical intervention play in the academic research on Karl M. Baer? In 1996, Annette Runte discusses the memoir in her study of autobiographical accounts by transsexuals between 1930 and 1990. She deems it "possibly the first autobiography of a hermaphrodite [Zwitter] who underwent surgery" (Runte 1996, 23). Runte consults both the memoir and Hirschfeld's case study published in 1917, which identifies the patient as the memoir's author. Soon after, David Brenner claims that

Baer consulted with Hirschfeld, "who operated on her [sic] to correct her anatomical 'deficiency'", therefore openly narrating his transition through medical intervention (Brenner 1998, 33). In his afterword to the memoir's reprint in 1993, Hermann Simon briefly refers to a *Geschlechtsberichtigung* (correction of gendersex) (Simon 1993, 223). It is unclear whether he refers to the legal process that Baer underwent to change his name and gendersex marker or to medical procedures. In an article published twenty years after the reprint, Simon describes Baer's story as tragic – "especially when we consider that his name change was preceded by medical intervention, however large or small it might have been" (Simon 2013, 79). This description might serve as a hint that Simon associated medical procedures with the terms *Umwandlung* and *Geschlechtsberichtigung* also in his earlier writings. Citing Simon's article from 2013, Dieter Oelschlägel also narrates Baer's *Umwandlung* in the context of corrective surgery (Oelschlägel 2018, 138). More recent examples of Baer's supposed medical procedures also include Marion Hulverscheidt's online article from 2017, "Nobody's Body. Medizinhistorische Reflexion über 'Aus eines Mannes Mädchenjahren'". Similar to Simon, she mentions that an unspecified operation has taken place (Hulverscheidt 2017). Hulverscheidt has since adjusted her position, as I will discuss below. Savran's and Rachamimov's article "In the Folds of the Skirt. The Different Lives of Karl M. Baer" (published in Hebrew) is the only academic example following of the narrative of Baer as "the *first* person to undergo gender reassignment surgery" (Savran and Rachamimov 2015, 22).¹⁰

Are there any indications that Baer himself might have undergone medical procedures in the course of his *Umwandlung*? Both literature scholars and scholars studying the memoir in the context of medical history have shown interest in the sexological intertextuality within the memoir, frequently referring to Hirschfeld's published case report. Hirschfeld

¹⁰ My emphasis.

served as Baer's consultant when he appealed to change his gendersex marker and name. The same case report was published in 1906 and in 1917. In 1906, the journal *Medizinische Reform* printed a lecture of Hirschfeld which contained the case of "Anna Laabs" – a pseudonym for Baer – among two others, in 1917, Hirschfeld listed this case in a chapter on hermaphroditism (Hirschfeld 1906, 614; 1917, 44–46). In this anonymized case study, Hirschfeld includes a detailed description of the patient's bodily characteristics, including the genitals. He suggests a surgical analysis of the gonads – but does not mention if such a procedure was performed (Hirschfeld 1917, 46). In her article "N. O. Body, Magnus Hirschfeld und die Diagnose des Geschlechts", historian Myriam Spörri argues that a diagnostic procedure of the gonads would have been unlikely in 1906 – these rudimentary procedures often resulted in castration and were therefore not widely performed (Spörri 2003, 249).

Besides, what part does surgery play in the medical history of transition? Even though the early stages of what would be later classified as gender affirmation surgeries were already being developed in the first decade of the 20th century, the procedures were rudimentary and, more importantly, not widely practiced. According to historian Rainer Herrn, the first female-to-male gendersex reassignment procedure that is verifiable by sources was performed in 1912 (Herrn 2005, 104). Herrn shows that even in the 1920s, sexologists and surgeons started to consider gender affirmation surgeries as possible treatment of transvestites; these surgeries were the exception rather than the norm (Herrn 2005, 167). Baer started his social and legal transition in 1906. At this time, Hirschfeld's *Institut für Sexualwissenschaft*, which became the most important address for trans and intersex healthcare in Berlin, was not yet established – it opened in 1919. Surgeons such as Ludwig Levy-Lenz were responsible for the implementation of gendersex affirming procedures, not Hirschfeld (Bauer 2017, 85). Baer therefore wouldn't have been referred to him for medical procedures. Hirschfeld

or his colleagues could have referred Baer to someone else, but there is no clue in the memoir or other sources in connection to Baer. Recently, Hulverscheidt has also readdressed the question of surgical procedures in more detail. In the 2022 reprint of the memoir, she stresses that aesthetic surgeries were not common in the early 20th century – and since the case studies report no functional problems, it is unlikely that any procedure was ever performed on Baer (Hulverscheidt 2022, 180–181).

As we have seen, a few authors have addressed the physical dimensions of Baer's transition in some capacity. Spörri (2003, 249), Hulverscheidt (2022, 180–181), and Hilger (2016, 244) have convincingly argued that neither the case studies on Baer nor the medical state of the art suggest that he underwent surgeries. What aspects of early 20th century transition and intersex and trans narratives do we miss out on if we don't extend our analysis beyond a determinative, medical-historical approach? Rather than focusing on the question if Baer himself had surgical procedures, I will now contextualize *Umwandlung* as a sexological concept.

The conceptual history of *Umwandlung*

In order to understand *Umwandlung* as a sexological concept in the early 20th century, I am first turning to a sexologist who is closely connected to Karl M. Baer and the publication of the memoir. Although he does not use the term in the case study, Hirschfeld mentions it in connection to a case of another hermaphrodite in *Sexualpathologie*, where he also publishes Baer's anonymized case report. Here, he includes the following description:

her [sic] wish for a masculine occupation and, hence, a change [Umwandlung] concerning name declaration, dress, and lifestyle, is *extraordinarily* pronounced and advocated with strong, purposeful conviction (Hirschfeld 2017, 58).¹¹

¹¹ Emphasis in the original.

Hirschfeld uses the term only once in *Die Transvestiten* (Hirschfeld 1925, 423). In his publication *Geschlechts-Umwandlungen* (1912), he equally applies the term to those he classifies as hermaphrodites as well as transvestites who show no signs of bodily ambiguity. Here, *Umwandlung* concerns social and legal changes – similar to the description in the quote above – and also physical transformation. These physical changes, however, are not the consequence of medical intervention but rather signs of the “true sexgender” coming to the body’s surface – for example, changes during puberty that seem to contradict the gendersex that was assigned at birth, such as growth of facial hair in a child assigned female at birth (Hirschfeld 1912, 15-16). In general, Hirschfeld rarely uses the term, and when he does, it has only legal and social implications or describes physical transformation with no connection to medical intervention.

Reviews of the memoir circulated around its publication in 1907 also provide insight into the time’s understanding of *Umwandlung*. Some reviews were also published in medical periodicals (Merzbach 1908; “Rezension” 1910). Wouldn’t these reviewers be especially interested in the medical dimensions of the protagonist’s story? Merzbach addresses the “official change of gendersex” (Merzbach 1908, 101). U. discusses the protagonist’s external transition – without any reference to surgical procedures (U. 1907, 320). Kempendorff reads the memoir as the success story of a young woman with “masculine spirit” and a “masculine body”, now beginning a life as a heterosexual man (Kempendorff 1907, 496). Praetorius focusses on the medical diagnosis of “sexual intermediaries” – such as hermaphrodites – rather than the protagonists’ social transformation (Praetorius 1910, 74–76). These reviewers most likely could not connect the anonymized memoir to Karl M. Baer and to his medical case studies – as I mentioned before, Hirschfeld’s publication which connected the medical case to the memoir only appeared in 1917. The first publication in 1906 contained no such hint. Therefore, the memoir was the reviewers’ only source of

information, which they read informed by gendersex concepts of their time. In their readings of the memoir, referring to its narration of and the practices with *Umwandlung*, the absence of medical intervention is telling.¹²

Although a larger comparative study of the sexological discourse is needed, a glimpse into Hirschfeld’s writings and reviews of the memoir already reveals the various aspects of *Umwandlung* in the early 20th century: changes of social practices (dress, hair style etc.) and, sometimes, the according legal corrections (name, gendersex marker) as well as spontaneous bodily development which called the gendersex assigned at birth into question. Medical intervention, however, is not one of them.

A close-reading of the memoir

The first mention of the term *Umwandlung* appears in Presber’s foreword to the memoir. Here, Presber reminisces about his first two encounters with Baer. First, he is introduced to Baer when he was still presenting as a woman, and then, two weeks later, encounters “the same visitor, and yet *not* the same” (MY 4; MJ 15).¹³ Presber describes Baer’s outer appearance, his dress, his body language, and assesses his performance of masculinity and femininity. He calls Baer “the changed one” (“der Umgewandelte”, *ibid.*),

12 The lack of surgical procedures does not only shape concepts of transition but also of trans and intersex embodiment itself. As Herrn points out, signs of a dissociative relation towards the body in terms of gendersex – what is classified today through the medical diagnosis of gender dysphoria – were only rarely described by sexologists around 1910: Herrn 2005, 103. Some transvestites were reported to opt for self-imposed medical interventions, for example self-inflicted castration. These cases seem to be rare, although further research in this area is needed: Herrn 2005, 103–105. This shows that sexologists in the early 20th century did not generally perceive trans and intersex people through the prism of self-hatred and body dysphoria.

13 Emphasis in the original.

presumably alluding to the change in presentation and gender expression that occurred in the two weeks between their meetings. In their article, Savran and Rachamimov interpret the period of two weeks between Baer's encounters with Presber as the point in time when Baer's surgical gendersex reassignment occurred (Savran and Rachamimov 2015, 31). Here, Savran and Rachamimov seem to base their interpretation on their associations with the word *Umwandlung* (both "change" and "transformation" in Deborah Simon's English translation) – after all, Presber does not mention any surgical procedures that have been performed in the meantime.

Later, the protagonist narrates this time period from his point of view. He cuts his hair, dons a frock coat and pants for the first time, and makes his first appearances in public (MY 103–104; MJ 121–122). At first glance, it seems like *Umwandlung* only refers to social practices and acts of embodiment beyond medical intervention.

Another passage has often been interpreted as indirectly referring to *Geschlechtssumwandlung* in the surgical sense: shortly after the protagonist is first diagnosed as male while recovering from a leg injury, we read: "For three days, I was down with fever" – "Drei Tage lang lag ich im Fieber" (MY 100; MJ 117). Savran and Rachamimov argue that this state is the result of a medical procedure (Savran and Rachamimov 2015, 31). However, the often-quoted passage remains vague. The life-changing conversation with the doctor happens at home while he is lying in bed. After the conversation, the protagonist expresses his emotions about the revelation and reflects on his past and future. I will now closely examine the subsequent passage:

I lay still for many hours. The new state of affairs was so overwhelming that I could not yet seriously grasp it. Now a bright light lay on our dark path.

For three days, I lay in a fever. The doctor came every day, and he had

retained the services of a discreet and reliable nurse. I know nothing of my feverish dreams. I only remember that I lived in regions of boundless bliss.

I regained consciousness only on the third day. The severe fever had weakened me so much that I was able to recover my strength only slowly. The delight of the reawakening of my strength was mixed with joyful thoughts of a happy future. I had not actually wanted to write Hanna of the happy turn in our destiny, partly because I feared the letter might be lost and partly because I did not know how she would bear the joyous missive. In the end, however, I hinted at the content of my discussion with the doctor. Joyfully, she wrote back to me. Yes, at last, this was the path to happiness. *I should have the change done, and then she would free herself for me.* First, though, we must see one another once more (MY 100).¹⁴

¹⁴ My emphasis. "Viele Stunden lag ich ganz unbeweglich. Das Neue war so gewaltig auf mich eingestürmt, daß ich das Ereignis ernstlich noch gar nicht zu fassen vermochte. Nun lag auf unseren trüben Wegen ein helles Licht. Drei Tage lang lag ich im Fieber. Der Arzt kam täglich und hatte auch eine zuverlässige, diskrete Wärterin besorgt. Von meinen Fieberträumen weiß ich nichts mehr; ich erinnere mich nur noch, daß ich in Regionen schrankenloser Seligkeit lebte. Erst am dritten Tag kam ich wieder zum Bewußtsein. Das heftige Fieber hatte mich so geschwächt, daß ich mich nur langsam wieder erholen konnte. In das Wonnegefühl des Wiedererwachens aller Kräfte mischten sich die freudigen Gedanken an eine glückliche Zukunft. Eigentlich hatte ich Hanna von der glücklichen Wendung unseres Geschicks nichts schreiben wollen, teils, weil ich fürchtete, daß der Brief verloren gehen könnte, und andererseits, weil ich nicht wußte, wie sie die Freudenbotschaft ertragen würde. Ich deutete ihr aber doch schließlich den Inhalt meiner Unterredung mit dem Arzte an. Jubelnd schrieb sie mir zurück. Ja, das endlich sei der Weg zum Glück. Ich sollte die Umwandlung vornehmen, dann wolle sie sich für mich freimachen. Aber vorher müßten wir uns noch einmal sehen" (MJ 117–18).

The states of recovery, unconsciousness and joy the protagonist experiences open up the passage for interpretations of physical transition. I, on the other hand, would not read this passage as an indirect reference to surgical procedures. First, there is no point in the text that expresses a change of location or passing of time. The whole passage is written in the course of a longer paragraph. The line-break before the aforementioned sentence (“For three days”) is the only hint to an interruption in the consecutive events. Second, the protagonist refers to “the doctor” without further specification. Since he last spoke to the doctor treating his leg injury, no other medical professional has been mentioned. Only later, when he seeks to change his official documents, does he consult other doctors for their medical opinion (MY 103; MJ 121). “The doctor” is most likely the one who treated him for his leg injury and continues to see through his aftercare. It is very unlikely that he was also a specialist in gendersex related surgical procedures. Third, the protagonist concludes the paragraph with his girlfriend’s request to wait with the *Umwandlung* until her divorce is finalized. This, again, indicates that the aforementioned passage is very close in time to the initial revelation and his *Umwandlung*, whatever it might entail, still lies ahead.¹⁵

According to my reading, nowhere in the memoir does the term *Umwandlung* clearly allude to medical interventions with the goal to masculinize the protagonist’s body. In fact, *Umwandlung* seems to consist of social and embodied practices only – which are pushed to the sidelines by readings focusing on medical intervention. In their article, Savran and

15 Hulverscheidt suggests that the “minor operation” recommended by the doctor might refer to a circumcision – a religious obligation for Jewish men. See: Hulverscheidt 2022, 179-84. This interpretation is an interesting entry point for an analysis at the intersection of Jewishness and gendersex, more of which I have explored in my Master’s thesis. Considering the scope of this article, I’m not able to explore *Umwandlung* in terms of both gendersex as well as Jewishness.

Rachamimov understand the narrative of *Umwandlung* in the memoir as a focal point of possibility and agency. They write: “Few in Israel know that he is one of the first people in the world who underwent gender reassignment surgery” (Savran and Rachamimov 2015, 22). Baer’s supposed medical transition is not only one of the details they want to make known about his life but also one of the reasons why they tell his story in the first place. Queer, trans and intersex people might find hope, relatedness, and empowerment in (re)constructing Baer as the first person to undergo gender affirmation surgery, as Rachamimov and Savran’s article and the introduction of Baer into queer genealogies suggest.¹⁶ When Baer is remembered through and for his transition, these particular (re)constructions of the memoir and his life shape the historiographic image of him. Reading medical procedures into the narrative of *Umwandlung* can be a way to reclaim trans and intersex histories as sites of potential and agency. By deconstructing this persistent, potentially empowering narrative, have I not provided yet another negative, suspicious reading, one that might undermine this potentially life-giving interpretation? Is there a way to connect the conceptual history of *Umwandlung* with the memoir’s narrative and can such a reading be fruitful for trans and intersex histories as well?

Reading beyond surgical intervention – the potentials of suspicion

Transition is thousands of little gestures of protest and presence, adding up and getting some momentum behind them so that you finally achieve escape velocity from the category you were stuck in all those years ago (Carter 2014, 236).

16 I borrow the term relatedness in the context of queer, trans and intersex historiography from Carolyn Dinshaw, who describes that, despite their “relatedness in isolation”, the researcher and the researched touch through the practice of queer historiography. See: Dinshaw 1999, 170.

In the memoir, these transitional gestures mostly refer to embodied and social practices, such as masculine-coded clothing or behavior. As part of changing his “outward appearance” (“äußerliche Umwandlung”), the protagonist cuts his hair and wears a frock coat for the first time (MY 103–104; MJ 121–122). He admits that he started this process already before he received permission from the authorities (MY 104; MJ 121). By undermining the official timeline of transition, he has agency over his *Umwandlung*. This agency, however, only becomes apparent when the transitional gestures he performs are perceived as part of his *Umwandlung*. Then, the memoir’s understanding is in line with Carter’s definition of transition: *Umwandlung*, just as transition, is made up of various little practices and experiences and cannot be reduced to legal decisions and medical procedures. Here, the memoir expands the sexological concept of *Umwandlung*. In Hirschfeld’s case study, the description of *Umwandlung* is short and practical. The narrative in the memoir is more elaborate and, more importantly, addresses the affectivity of the social, legal and embodied gestures.

By reading the narrative of *Umwandlung* through “little gestures” of transition or the interplay of different affects, suspicion enables me to read *Umwandlung* through various dimensions beyond medical intervention. Within this multidimensional perspective lies potential for intersex and trans readings. The affective nature of these practices of transition is not exclusively positive: when wearing pants for the first few times, the protagonist describes feeling “uneasy” and “insecure” (MY 103–104; MJ 121–122). Even though he and his girlfriend ultimately agree that his appearance changed for the better, transition remains ambivalent. Not only does masculine-coded behavior and social expectations directed at him feel strange, he also expresses discomfort over sharing a train compartment with other men (MY 104; MJ 122). Negative and ambivalent feelings are not erased in the memoir’s narrative of *Umwandlung*.

The protagonist’s *Umwandlung*, however, is not limited to changes in dress and behavior. In the memoir, *Umwandlung* does entail physical changes in the protagonist’s flesh, skin, muscle tissue, hair follicles and hormonal make-up. His body is narrated through a reoccurring theme of otherness. His genitals, for example, are only described in comparison to other children in his childhood. The girls remark: “Look here, Nora is very different from us” (MY 18; MJ 31). At the same time, the boys don’t seem to notice any difference or particularity: “Soaking wet, we came ashore. We undressed and laid out our clothing to dry in the sun. None of the boys found anything untoward about me, and I was glad of that” (MY 34; MJ 48). During puberty, he notices how his body develops differently from his female classmates. His voice drops: “Others found this amusing, but I was very disconcerted” (MY 41; MJ 57). He doesn’t start to menstruate and eventually decides to fake it. He keeps up this “lie”, as he claims, for ten years (MY 49–50; MJ 64–65). At the same time, he grows facial hair which, for a short time, increases his popularity (MY 50; MJ 65). Due to his “unusual lack of physical development”, he is misdiagnosed with consumption (MY 56; MJ 71). His colleagues think of him as “thin and as lacking in breasts as a ten-year-old” (MY 63; MJ 79).

First, the protagonist’s body changes through puberty and develops in unexpected ways – unexpected in the framework of his assigned gendersex. Second, his body is also affected by his social transition – without medical intervention, through his gendersex performance:

My body, which was no longer constricted by bodices and other tight articles of clothing, developed freely and became stronger. I now do gymnastics and other kinds of exercise to compensate for the forced prevention of a healthy development. [...] I have become stronger and broader, my posture is freer, and physically nothing is

likely to remain of my girlhood years other than a slight furrow left behind from tight lacing (MY 105).¹⁷

The protagonist's acts of gender performance have an immediate impact on his body. Both are intimately intertwined in his transition and subject to change, but differently than expected. His transition is not limited to the intentional actions he takes after he decides to live as male. From birth to puberty, his body pulls him off the linear path of gendersex development. Then, the author refashions his transition into a linear narrative. However, frameworks of surgical sex-change, regardless of their historical justification, fail to grasp the complexity and longevity of the protagonist's process of *Umwandlung*. The protagonist's physical transformation plays out on various body parts apart from the genitals, and not necessarily results from a new awareness of masculinity, a change in self-perception and outward presentation, but occasionally even precedes these conscious moments of transition. In fact, the memoir doesn't suggest change but continuity in the body itself during *Umwandlung*. After all, what is there to change? His body had already transitioned without medical intervention, through puberty. The only thing left to do was changing its gendersexed frame of reference from female to male. The very factor that especially today defines gendersex reassignment, surgical intervention, is missing because it is obsolete. The protagonist/Baer transitions to live in the body he was born in.

17 "Mein Körper, von keinem Mieder und keinem anderen einengenden Kleidungsstück mehr eingeschnürt, entfaltete sich freier und kräftiger. Ich turne und treibe jede Art Gymnastik, um die gewaltsame Behinderung der gesunden Entwicklung wieder auszugleichen. [...] Ich bin kräftiger und breiter geworden, meine Haltung freier, und körperlich dürfte aus meinen Mädchenjahren wohl nichts zurückbleiben als eine leichte Schnürfurche..." (MJ 122–23).

Conclusion

While the question if Karl M. Baer himself underwent surgery has been answered, a closer look at the early 20th century concept of *Umwandlung* enables us to read his story in a wider framework of German sexology as well as intersex and trans histories. A historical-contextual analysis of the term *Geschlechtsumwandlung* shows that it did not entail medical intervention in the German sexological discourse of the early 20th century. More so, aesthetic surgeries designed to turn genitals into ideal penises or vulvas were not performed on intersex people in the early 20th century (Hulverscheidt 2022, 180). Refashioning Baer's transition as a product of gendersex reassignment surgeries is not only historically inaccurate, but, as I hoped to show on a textual level, also misses out on the chance to take stories like his as a starting point to drastically rethink medicalizing notions of transition. In the age of gender affirming care, surgical intervention and hormone therapy, these practices have become representative of physical transition; transition, then, is almost exclusively thought through these interventions, especially when it comes to accessing medical or legal transition. Unlike intersex people diagnosed after the 1950s, Baer was not subjected to involuntary surgical procedures. Neither were such cosmetic or sterilizing procedures his only gateway to legal and social transition, as was long practiced in Germany through the implementation of the *Transsexuellengesetz* ("Transsexual law") in 1980.¹⁸ Baer's *Umwandlung* calls into question the quasi-ontological link between transition and medical intervention altogether.

18 At its implementation, the *Transsexuellengesetz* required trans people to show proof of sterilization and genital surgery in order to legally change their gender marker. This passage was declared unconstitutional in 2011 and, even though the law was not reformed, is ineffective today.

At first, it might seem negative and pessimistic to disprove the idea that Karl M. Baer received gender affirming surgeries, yet the result of this reading is not negative at all. As Carolyn Dinshaw formulated in the early days of queer historiography, “queer histories are made of affective relations” (Dinshaw 1999, 12). Through the little gestures, affects and embodied and social experiences he explores in his memoir, intersex and trans people who cannot or choose not to transition medically might find moments of recognition and affirmation. Intersex people especially might find positive empowerment in a past that predates forced sterilization and genital mutilation and look for transition narratives such as Baer’s to de-pathologize and de-surgicalize intersex in the future.

Earlier, I described my suspicion as an underlying sense of dread, which, echoing Barnwell, has driven my knowledge (Barnwell 2020, 115). My suspicion is still there but I am also left with curiosity. I’m curious which narratives of transition might come to light in the future and how frameworks indebted to the complexity of trans and intersex narratives will continue to impact their historiographic and literary analysis. This article’s conceptual history of *Umwandlung* is limited to the writings of one particular sexologist, Hirschfeld, and its analysis centers on the memoir of Karl M. Baer. However, the sheer absence of gendersex reassignment procedures in the 1900s suggests that early 20th century frameworks of transition – and, by extension, the very taxonomies of transvestites and hermaphrodites themselves – were not linked to medical intervention in a similarly formative, almost ontological way that developed since the 1950s. Historiographic and literary projects therefore need to further de-medicalize and de-surgicalize historical trans and intersex narratives as well as notions of transition. At the same time, they might – like this article hoped to show – make space for more complex, contradictory and multi-dimensional frameworks of transition, reframing intersex and

trans bodies, their transformation and narration as sites of potential and possibility as well as literary agency.

Here lies the transformative power of suspicion as a reading strategy: besides acknowledging my affective relation to cisnormative and heteronormative historiographies and readings, reading with suspicion has provided me with the necessary critical force, analytical scrutiny and methodological as well as affective openness to engage in critique and propose alternative narratives and readings of transition at the same time. By conceptualizing suspicion as affect, it is possible to address the flaws of critical readings while making use of their critical and affective force simultaneously. In this sense, reading with suspicion continues the tradition of queer approaches to hermeneutics, dismantling the binary of critique and post-critique, and joins the ranks of affective approaches to queer historiography and trans and intersex readings.

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