

Becoming Transparent: A Conversation with Cris Beam

Ed. by Rossella Carbotti

Cris Beam is a New York-based American writer, activist and scholar whose work displays a thorough engagement with questions related to gender, sexuality and family relationships, which she explores in their deep enmeshment with major social dynamics and issues, such as the collapse of the educational, correctional and foster care systems in the United States. Her debut work, *Transparent: Love, Family and Living the T with Transgender Teenagers* (Harcourt, 2007), is a social study-turned-memoir of the difficulties encountered by four transgender girls who struggle to find a safe space and opportunities for self-expression in Los Angeles over the course of seven years. A volunteer teacher at Eagles (Emphasizing Adolescent Gay/ Lesbian Education Services) – a high school program for gay and transgender kids at risk of being harassed and bullied in their original classrooms –, Beam finds herself getting more and more involved in the stories the girls tell her about themselves and their environment. Throughout the book, the author embarks on a transformative journey that enables her to find the true story of inner and outer metamorphosis that lies at the heart of the girls’ life experiences, shifting her own position from that of an outside observer to one of intense personal involvement. The narrative takes a radical turn when the author decides to become a foster mother to Christina, one of the girls. At that point, Beam’s account moves from journalistic essay to the parable of a personal and collective reflection on the impact of radical changes, and *Transparent* itself becomes a hybrid book that witnesses to the forcefulness of the stories it portrays in both form and content.

In 2008, *Transparent* won the Lambda Literary Award for best transgender fiction, and it also became a Stonewall Honor book. Since then, Beam has written again on “gender troubles” and teenagers in her young adult novel *I am J* (Little-Brown, 2011), which features a female-to-male transgender protagonist. *Running in the Family*, her study of the foster care system in the United States – partly inspired by the stories she witnessed while writing *Transparent* – is due for publication in 2013. More information on



Transparent and Cris Beam can be found at <http://www.crisbeam.com/Home> and <http://www.transparentthebook.com>.

The following interview was carried out in February 2011 in the context of a research project on the recurrent theme of bodily metamorphosis in queer literature from the 1990s to today. Here, the larger implications of transformative fantasies in transgender fiction are investigated, together with Beam, both in light of her own literary production and as entry points to a deeper understanding of the dynamics at play within the literary world and in contemporary society as a whole.

Carbotti: As a project, *Transparent* merges together personal experience, scholarly passion and activist commitment to create an original narrative of personal transformation that involves both you as a first-person narrator and the transgender teenagers you met in Los Angeles. When did you first realize that your experience at Eagles and your relationships with Christina and the other girls were going to become the subject of a book? Was the book originally conceived this way, or was it only at a later stage that you realized you had a true, original story to tell?

Beam: At first, I had no idea that I was going to make a book out of my experience. I had moved to LA to support my partner Robin, who was completing her PhD, and I was working as a journalist for several different publications. At some point, I heard about this high school that was run by a group of volunteer teachers with the aim of protecting at-risk gay and transgender kids who would be otherwise bullied by their schoolmates or would just be out in the streets, exposed to all sorts of danger. I decided to join the program as a volunteer English teacher, and found myself getting gradually more and more involved in helping the kids. I started working at Eagles in 1997. Back then there wasn't the same kind of visible transgender community that there is today—there were no talk shows about transgender teenagers, no movies, no Oprah specials—so they had little outside reflection of their lives—and when they did, it was pretty negative.

Carbotti: Is the program at Eagles still running today? And are you aware of other similar, official institutions running programs for gay and transgender teenagers? Do you think there are adequate resources available to the teen transgender community in US cities today?

Beam: Things have really changed today, and queer teenagers themselves have become more active and aware of their rights. Instead of

having separate programs with the aim of protecting them from the outside world, we have widespread student organizations, such as the Gay-Straight Alliances, where queer kids find support in their straight schoolmates and together they organize events such as the National Coming Out Day or local campaigns against homophobia and transphobia.

Eagles closed for a few years because of mismanagement, but I think it reopened and it now has a different staff and team of volunteers. There is a public school in the East Village in New York City, called the Harvey Milk High School, which is run by the Hetrick-Martin Institute, an outreach organization for at-risk teenagers with a specific emphasis on queer kids. Today, the Harvey Milk School is a fully-accredited public high school that is run by the local Department of Education. I was a volunteer teacher there for a semester when I moved to New York to help them out and conduct some comparative research after my experience at Eagles. I wanted to see how things were being done there and in what way the New York scene was different than the one in LA. I discovered that the Harvey Milk School is a very different institution from Eagles. While the Harvey Milk School is state-run, Eagles relied heavily on donations and on the dedication of volunteers. There was no money, the school had a bad reputation, and I often had to pay for pedagogical materials out of my own pocket or convince people to donate their services, such as in the case of the *Out & About* magazine project.

Carbotti: Can you describe the sort of environment you were confronted with as a teacher? Were you able to design your own courses? For example, did you follow a syllabus, or did you have to improvise and run your classes on the basis of the spontaneous participation of the kids?

Beam: It was all very badly organized, and teaching was for the most part an impossible task. The kids had more immediate life needs than sitting in class and learning, so designing fully-structured pedagogical projects for them was not our primary concern. The coordinator of the program was getting funding through the Department of Ed. He was only interested in keeping the numbers high and having the kids attend school regardless of the actual pedagogical offer. The kids would come to school on drugs, or tired from not having slept at night, and they would get distracted very easily or start singing, performing or fighting. As a teacher, you realized that being there involved mainly keeping them off the streets, listening to them and winning their trust. A lot of the kids were runaways, or had been thrown out and they may have been interested in school at some level—but they had more pressing needs—and they needed a lot of attention. They were like performers, competing with

each other to win the teachers' interest, yearning to be visible, to be seen. Since they knew I was a journalist, the kids started pressing me to tell their story. They would ask: "Why don't you write a book on us? Why don't you make a movie about us?" and eventually we came up with a project and created a magazine, called *Out & About*, where we published articles, reviews and medical advice for queer kids. It was at that point that I had the idea of making a book that would include a collection of photos and interviews of the transgender kids I had come to know through the Eagles community. As a trained journalist, I knew there was no such thing as objectivity, but still I wanted to get as close to it as possible, and wanted to keep myself completely out of the picture in order for the individual stories of the kids to emerge. So originally, I completely refused the idea of being part of the book. I wrote a proposal and passed it by some agents and editors, but they thought the format had been done before—like “Look! My life has been hard, but now it’s better!” Looking back, I have to agree with them: what were extraordinary experiences to me as a direct observer would have appeared too flat and clichéd in the book, along the lines of many other publications on lives in desperate conditions, and this is certainly not what I was aiming at.

And then, Christina had moved in with me and she was going through an extremely hard moment in her life, so I really thought that the project had to be abandoned, because I could not still remain objective as a narrator while having her in my house and in my life. I thought she couldn’t be in the story—and then suddenly I realized: she WAS the story. That's when I decided to step in and become a presence in the book, and that is how the book came to take its actual form.

Carbotti: While researching on queer literature, I was constantly struck by the recurrence of a sort of parallel, unexpected development of both form and content in narratives that place center stage the theme of metamorphosis. I call it “metamorphic storytelling,” the opening of an experimental space not only in the narrative content, but also in the way it plays around the borders of literary genres. Think for example of *Stone Butch Blues*, which is both a memoir and a novel: where do you draw the line between narrator and character, between fiction and lived reality? The same goes for *The Gilda Stories*, which brings together the episodic form of a collection of short stories with the project of writing a novel about the persistence of change through time and space, confronting the history of African-American struggles with a fantastic re-writing of lesbian mythology. Both a journalist's essay on transgender teenagers and a personal memoir on a transformative experience of motherhood, *Transparent* disrupts the artifice of objective narration to make

space for a different positionality of both the author and the characters in the book, whose roles often blur or overlap. Do you agree, and why do you think that is?

Beam: I completely agree, and I think that once you open that creative possibility for stories to take control of the narrative form, the writing process is going to be turned upside down at all levels. I had never imagined that I would find myself going through such a major life change precisely because I allowed myself to get closer to Christina and the other girls in order to write their story. There was no way I could keep pretending to be an outside narrator. With this book I found myself slowly letting go of all the rules that I had learned in journalism school, where the first thing they tell you is: "Never let your sources read what you are writing on them!" I felt that I had an ethical responsibility towards these kids, who had shared so much of themselves with me and who had been betrayed by the people in their lives so many times. I could not publish the book without having them read the manuscript first and give me their approval. We went through a whole phase when they revised the first drafts, and reminded me of details and episodes that I had forgotten along the way. All four of the girls helped me with the revision of the manuscript. I initially thought that reading the book would generate some resentment on their part, and I was afraid that they would feel hurt because of some particular episodes that I chose to include in the book. It turned out that, on most occasions, they were more concerned about some tiny details that I could not even remember and that, on the contrary, seemed to really matter for them. So I had to go back several times and rewrite some scenes because they wanted me to include more specific details. In the end, the story I had in mind interwove with their recollections of the events on even a further level, and editing the manuscript together drew us closer and changed the book itself into a different project overall. So we can certainly say that both form and content of the book were shaped by our mutual influence in each other's lives.

Carbotti: How did you address the problem of writing about transgender teenagers from the perspective of a cisgender person? Were you worried about misrepresenting the true experience of the kids, or making assumptions about what being transgender means? Trans-activist and academic Jacob Hale famously wrote a piece on this topic, laying out a set of "Suggested Rules for Non-Transsexuals Writing about Transsexuals, Transsexuality, Transsexualism, or Trans___", where he advises cisgender writers against the risk of Othering the subjects they describe, or taking for granted that

transgender is a stable category, whereas it defines a mode of gender perception which is constantly under re-definition.

Beam: Yes, I was perfectly aware of the problem and I was terrified of ending up betraying my whole experience with the kids by writing a flat portrait of what their lives were like. I had to confront all my fears of being an unreliable narrator, and I was aware of how hard it is for non-trans people to write about being trans without abstracting from the lived reality of transpeople, at the risk of objectifying, romanticizing or exoticizing their experience. It was really a matter of finding a narrative voice that could account for the complexities of my experience with the girls both during my time at Eagles and when I became Christina's foster mother. Being honest and accurate about their lives was a priority that I kept at the forefront of my mind when writing. These girls were leading very intense lives, and I had to account for the whole range of experiences and emotions that they were exposed to. I could not do this by keeping myself at a distance, and I had to transform my whole perspective on the story itself. Getting to know the girls really allowed me to narrow the distance between my own life experience and theirs, whereas I originally thought that we occupied very distinct positions, that I was the outside observer and that my life had very little in common with theirs. It was thanks to Christina and the other girls that I came to realize how many of their problems were caused by a lack of attention and care on the part of the people who should have guided them through life, and how that resonated with my own past experience. Seeing them struggle to be visible, to get the adults to pay attention to them, often in ways that were self-destructive, led me to open my heart and my mind and see myself in them, and that changed my whole perspective both as a writer and as a human. I could not have confronted my past the way I did if I hadn't witnessed the girls' struggle to survive and express themselves in a hostile society, against repressive families and institutions. I am very grateful to them for teaching me that lesson and making me see a part of myself, that I had till then neglected, in them.

Carbotti: In fact, the whole second part of *Transparent* becomes the story of your own transformation following your experience with Christina, and I think you have found a very direct way of expressing a different political take on transgender activism, one that accounts for the specific stories of the girls without objectifying them, and on the other hand avoids making trite humanist assumptions about the fundamental common “nature” of all human beings. By stepping in and relating the story of your own metamorphosis, of how the different experience of another person spoke to you, you found your own

authorial voice and a new voice for committed political activism as well, blending the personal and the political in new creative forms.

Beam: Thank you. This is precisely how I see it, too. I still felt that I wanted the book to address a wider audience than just the queer community, but I was worried that my efforts would end up disappointing some transgender readers, and that I would be accused of speaking from a privileged outside position. I didn't want to account for the whole, immense range of transgender experiences: how could I? At the same time, even when I realized that this was going to be a story about my own change as well, it was also my priority to include lots of research and statistical data and descriptions of the factual realities and problems that transgender teens have to face, because I wanted people to know, to understand and to become familiar with the specific situation that I was surrounded by. I wanted to raise awareness regarding the particular state of things I had become a witness of. At the same time, I realized that there was much more to the story than just a journalistic account.

Carbotti: In an interview with “Salon” magazine, you discuss the problematic relationship between feminist and queer academic communities and outreach activism to transkids and transpeople in general. Their political agendas often differ considerably, and despite the obvious connections between their aims and their concerns, many outreach activists and workers lament the lack of dialogue between these two dimensions. In academic discourse, transgender subjects have often become expendable bodies in the arena of philosophy and theory, signifying tokens of a sophisticated political strategy that aims at liberating and expanding our understanding of gender and sexuality. Nevertheless, the risk is to lose track of the materiality of lived experiences, with its risks, unfair living conditions and limited visibility. Your book makes a considerable effort to tie together the two ends of this debate, providing an extensive overview of theoretical positions and putting them side by side with the practical description of everyday life in the streets, with kids being exposed to HIV, abuse, prostitution and violence.

Beam: It is exactly like that, and I would like to see a more organic collaboration between the two sides of the queer and feminist community. I think academia has done extremely important work in reaching that level of intellectual articulation and designing courses and curricula that openly address the issues of sexuality and gender, changing the people's perception of these crucial concepts and discussions and shaping the way these ideas circulate today. At the same time, the queer community outside of academia is

in constant evolution, and individual or group activists and artists are being so creative and original in the way they address these issues that it would be wonderful to create a more direct dialogue between the two dimensions. In many ways, both the academic and the street communities are articulating the same kind of anxieties. The problem is that they often speak two different languages, although there is a subterranean, but constant flow of information that circulates between the street and the academia. Things wouldn't have changed so rapidly and on such a big scale over the last few decades if it had been otherwise. Yet, I would like for street activism to acquire more visibility on a wider level. Take, for example, the work of an artist like Foxxjazell, who writes hip hop songs on her transgender condition and wants to change the people's perception of transgender people through her art. She is unaware of the intellectual debates that are going on in academia, yet she is rethinking gender from her own perspective in ways that are absolutely fresh and exciting. For example, she has a song, *Boy Girl, Whateva*, that goes:

I'm playing with your mind, I'm fooling your eyes
Straight up baby, I want you to slide
If I say I'm a boy, you call me a she
If I say I'm a girl, you call me a he.
I am what I am; I love you forevah.
So take me as a boy, a girl, whatevah.
Yo: This is a lesson to be learned.
Nothing is ever what it seems to be.

In this song, I think she's really playing with the subject and object positions. She's taking the objectified position that the transperson often occupies and flipping it on its head. She's acknowledging that others will undo what she asks of them—if she says she's a girl, they'll call her a boy. But maybe she wants it this way. Maybe she's comfortable in this position of “sliding”—and just when you think you've “gotten” her by undermining her/mislabeling her, she slips away. Now you (we) are the ones who are sliding. In this way, gender is relational, it is dynamic. It is always understood and reborn in relation to another person or people. When she says, “I want you to slide,” she's wanting you to slide in your own gender, your own interpretations. She articulates gender as something that is unassigned to the body, but is configured as a fluid relationship between the subject and the gaze of the observer: I am no gender but the one you see in me each single time. In *Boy Girl, Whateva*, Foxxjazell theorizes gender as a relational concept, not as an essential quality or characteristic that is embedded in us. Ideally, she is

prefiguring a world without genders, where gender is always up for new connotations, and gets constituted and reconstituted through the practical interactions between people.

Carbotti: I think that this is a very cutting-edge take on gender, one that I would like to see more represented in our culture. Foxxjazell is bringing to Earth and to everyday life the utopian positions of science fiction writers such as James Tiptree, Ursula K. Le Guin and Joanna Russ, who prefigured worlds without genders, and yet where genders are attributes under constant renegotiation. In my own personal experience with transgender people and in their interactions with society, as well as in my academic research, I have come to the conclusion that “gender is in the eye of the beholder.” We decide what we want to see based on our past experiences and reflections on gender, and our perceptions change as we think further into the idea of gender itself, thanks to the people we meet and the changing images that society offers us today.

Beam: Yes. This is why in my own work I did not want to account for the whole category of transgender, because I do not think that there is just one. Like “queer”, “transgender” has become another protective, yet restrictive umbrella-term that cannot circumscribe the whole picture. It helps you to pin points on a map, but it cannot tell you what the journey is about, and how it is constantly changing. I wanted to describe what I was seeing, and I felt the urge to tell people about the medical, psychological and material conditions of the kids I became close to. In the process, it became an attempt to grasp the subtle ways in which, when we start questioning what gender and identity are about, we come to a deeper understanding of how our perceptions of ourselves are inscribed within a world of relations, and that we have both the possibility and responsibility to change our ways of thinking and make space for the new and the unexpected.

Carbotti: I am glad that you mentioned the idea of the journey, because it is a recurrent and indeed fitting metaphor in contemporary representations of transgender lives. I am thinking of *Transamerica* as a film, but also of the movements through time and space that constitute the symbolic and material trajectories of many transgender novels and memoirs (such as *Stone Butch Blues* or *Il viaggio di Arnold*, to cite an Italian example). Narratives of transformation are stories that get shaped through the encounter between a single individual and society at a particular place and time in history, and in the case of transgender stories, the marks of the encounter literally get written

on the body of the protagonists. The position we occupy in the world shapes our identity, and metamorphosis is about putting concepts and ideas in motion. Being transgender is about taking that mobility as a permanent condition, staying in the liminal space.

In your book, transitional and metamorphic experiences are also connected to the idea of changing spaces, both on a symbolic and material level. The opening of the chapter “Arriving” is a celebration of big coastal cities in the US. You write: “The coasts are where the people live, right at the boundaries of where we cannot.” The coasts, with their watery, fluid quality, are transformative places by definition. They represent both safe harbors for transgender kids fleeing from more oppressive spaces, but they also hide many threats, the challenge of losing themselves while seeking better life conditions.

Beam: US coastal cities like New York, Boston, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Miami attract all sorts of people in search of themselves. Those are the places where things happen, where kids feel that they can blend in. On one hand, big cities offer the privilege of anonymity, and this appeals to transkids who are often targeted as freaks in their hometowns because of their gender identity or non-conforming behavior. On the other hand, big cities provide the comfort of a community of people who share your same experience. For transkids, those are also the places where they can find hormones, clinics, volunteer organizations, all sorts of things that are out of their reach elsewhere. Coastal cities are the places where you are allowed to transform. In a way you *have* to, because you are exposed to so many different coexisting realities that you get caught in a transformative process regardless of the reasons that originally brought you there. Transkids go to a place like Los Angeles because they want to become stars, but also because they know that hormones are easily available. They are illegally imported from Tijuana. So traveling to the city means crossing that threshold that will allow them to experiment with their bodies and their gender identities, but also meet like-minded people, find an accepting community, exciting adventures, maybe a job. So in this sense cities are often safer places for transkids, but they are also a threat because many of them manage to escape from an abusive home, but sooner or later they might end up experiencing street life, homelessness, drugs, prostitution, violence, destructive medical treatments and surgeries.

Carbotti: Your book shows how this situation often leads the kids to establish spontaneous community networks, which often reinvent familial bonds in original ways, queering our understanding of what family means. Motherhood, for example, gets completely reinvented in *Transparent*, both in

the case of “drag mothers” and in your own story of becoming a foster mother to Christina and coming to terms with your dramatic experience of affective deprivation in the relationship with your mother. In my own work, I traced the parallel recurrence of stories of queer metamorphosis and the idea of a different kind of motherhood and kinship that is not founded on biological grounds, where roles and positions are more open and interchangeable. Why do you think these two themes often appear to be intertwined?

Beam: This was a very important lesson that I learned by getting to know Christina and the other girls. Seeing these very young girls parenting each other, forming strong bonds of solidarity and support based on the mutual understanding of their needs opened up a completely new space of possibilities, a different way of looking at family for me. Drag mothers are older transgender teens who adopt and mentor their younger friends. They often give them their new, transgender names and teach them what they need to know about street life, as well as give them fashion tips, advice on how to pass as biological women, suggestions on how to find a boyfriend. And there was a whole lineage of drag mothers: Foxx, for example, who was a drag mother to Lenora and Ariel but who in turn had found a mother in Tatiana, with whom she switched roles often, going from mother to daughter and back. In New York, drag mothers can become heads of household, leading figures in the queer ball scene.

Through Christina and the other girls I became familiar with other ways of making family and community, and when Christina went through a difficult time in her life it became impossible for me to detach myself from what she was going through. I eventually became her foster mother, but it took me a long time to realize that I had been unconsciously drawn to help these kids because I had once been in their same position, and my life had been so hard because of the horrible relationship I had with my mom. I realized it very late, when I was already involved in my maternal relationship with Christina, and it had never dawned on me before that my mother could have been the reason behind my desire to protect and nurture these kids. For a long time I thought that I had chosen to volunteer at Eagles and get to know them closely because, as a queer person myself, I thought we were connected because we were all queer. But in the end it was like duh: Here I am, bonding with all these motherless kids. And I am a motherless kid. That was the heart connection. In choosing to mother Christina at the most difficult time in her life, I chose to come to terms with my own past and begin a healing process. As a result, everything in my life went through a transformative process: Christina,

myself, my relationship with the past and my plans for the future, my idea of family, and the book I was writing.

Carbotti: The title of the book encapsulates your journey beautifully: in experiencing change through and with Christina, in choosing to love her as a mother, you went through a transformation that made you “transparent” to yourself, allowing you to see through the shadows of the past. At the same time, you became a “trans-parent”, which to me means more than just being the mother of a transperson. It means embracing the idea that trans- is more than a body in transition, it is a mode of perception, a philosophical understanding of change and liminality as ways of being in and of the world that involve society as a whole.

Beam: I am glad you saw all this in the title, because it is precisely what I wanted to express. Once we start to question the deeper reasons that guide us through life, we embrace that awareness that allows us to make room for the new, and at the same time to create a more conscious continuum with our past. *Transparent* became my story as well as the story of the girls, and it unexpectedly turned into this entirely new project I had never imagined it could be. In inventing new practices of care and forms of affectivity with Christina and making space in my life for her to feel protected and to heal, I created a healing space for myself as well, and was able to come to terms with the past and to answer the questions about motherhood and family that I had kept within me throughout my whole life.

Carbotti: The ending chapters of the book describe Christina as a body in metamorphosis between theory and practice, on both a symbolic and material level, in a play of images that resonates with ideas of rebirth, liberation and coming-of-age. I am thinking in particular of the sparrow tattoo and of the scene when she calls you from her new apartment, “perched like a bird” on the kitchen sink. It was fascinating for me to find out that, like *Stone Butch Blues* (the other book I worked on), *Transparent* ends with the image of the transgender protagonist “putting on wings” and looking towards the future, having found closure and yet a new sense of continuity with the past both in body and in mind.

Beam: That is true! I had never thought about this parallel image in the ending of *Stone Butch Blues*, which is such an important book for transgender history. As for Christina, the sparrow tattoo was an occasion to commemorate her bond with me and Robin, who used to call her “sparrow” when she lived

with us. Sparrows are also community birds that symbolize familial love. She decided to do it after she went to live on her own and found a job that she liked, and so the sparrow came to signify her attachment to us, but also her flight into a different life. She wanted my brother, who's an artist, to design the image, and she asked for a really big tattoo that she loves to show to everyone. A few years ago we stopped talking for a while, and the thought of that tattoo on her body always made me feel good, like there was a sign of our bond that could not be taken away.

The night she called me from her kitchen sink she was hiding in there, in her brand new apartment where she went to live on her own, afraid of the responsibilities that came with the new life she had sought. Just like her new life, the apartment felt too big, too full of promises and expectations, and she wasn't sure she could handle all that. I stayed on the phone, determined to show her that she was ready for her new life, that her adult life had in fact just started already.

Carbotti: Your interest for changes within the family structure seems to be an ongoing concern in your work. I have read on your website that you are also working on another book, *Running in the Family*, which will expand some of the research that you have presented in *Transparent*.

Beam: Yes, I have been doing research for this book for the last five years, and it will probably come out in late 2012 or 2013. It will be focused on foster care in New York City, where I have been following foster families, pretty much in the same way that I did for *Transparent*, where I was partly researching the lives of transgender foster kids. The experiences I recounted in *Transparent* naturally led me to get more involved and interested in the foster care system. In the new book, I look at foster kids, their biological and foster families and track what happens to them. Through the narratives of the people I met, I tried to understand what happens when these kids run away from their families and their parents try to get them back, or what happens to biological parents in this system. I also studied the problem of alcoholism and other issues that are related to the foster care system. Half a million kids are in foster care in the US, billions are spent on it and no one thinks that the system is working. I wanted to know why, and I had to find out for myself, because there are not many good books on this subject, just a few policy or interview books, but no one is telling a story about how this monstrosity came to be.

Carbotti: Another line that struck me from your book was “We all float a little.” It appears when you discuss the girls’ ways of defining their gender

identities, which were constantly shifting and being redefined. There is a constant interplay between performativity and “realness,” which contributes in equal ways to defining what the “T” is about. As a result, it feels extremely plausible that the girls would think of themselves as “a boy, a girl” at the same time, being caught in the social artifice of gender and yet striving to express their own authentic identities.

Beam: The line between performativity and “realness” was very thin among the girls. They could be really mean to each other, tease each other out for not being feminine enough. I described a network of horizontal community bonds among them that could be incredibly generous and inclusive, but in terms of “realness” their social structure was often based on complex hierarchies, and the more you could pass as biologically female, the more you looked like one of their extremely feminine favorite divas, the higher up you were placed on their social scale. But their own perceptions of what gender is were constantly in progress, and so there was a lot of theatricality in this game of “realness.” The girls were aware of that, and the same model is reproduced within the drag ball culture in New York City, where queer fashion houses are extremely competitive and structured, producing a variety of gender categories and asking their models to adhere to them. But the paradox is that this is a *game* of “realness,” a parody of the restrictions we put upon gender and upon our identities in general. I think Foxxjazell's song really captured it well. And if you take Judith Butler's ideas of gender and performativity, which were so groundbreaking and influential for the whole queer community and for the way we think about these issues today, you find them to be very liberating theories, but very unsettling at the same time. In the end, we discover that ideas like “realness” and performance, which we used to consider opposites, can actually merge into one another and unsettle our assumptions and perception of what identity means.

Carbotti: And this is the great gift of transgender theory and political practice, which is still partially misrepresented even within the GLBT community, not to mention society as a whole, and yet it is by thinking through the trans- prefix that we have come to imagine a wider, more varied world when we talk about gender.

Beam: Absolutely. It is thanks to the intellectual and material contribution of transgenders that we do not think in terms of identity politics anymore, and the queer space is so creative and open to constant redefinitions.

Carbotti: As we speak, you are just about to come out with a new book, *I am J*. This is your first novel, and it is the story of a transgender FTM teenager. It is intended for a public of young adults, who have recently proved to be a very interested audience for stories on transgender identity, like the recent *Luna*, by Julie Anne Peters, and *Parrotfish*, by Ellen Wittlinger. How do you feel about it?

Beam: I am very excited about it, and I hope that the transgender community will like it, as well as my young adult audience. Once again, I have tried to be as honest as I could in telling the story I had in mind, drawing from little episodes in the life of many people I know, and adapting them to the character of a boy who is completely my invention. It is a story of self-discovery, but being transgender is not the only key theme in this novel. It was also an occasion for me to go back to my experience with female-to-male transkids when I was in LA, which I had to leave out of *Transparent* in the end.

As for the audience, I hope the book will have a good, varied range of readers. There is a number of young adult readers who are very active on the Internet and who are very interested in this book. I am soon going to start a blog tour where I will post as a guest on twenty different blogs. I didn't know anything about blog tours until recently, but apparently it is becoming a widespread phenomenon online. These blogs are run by teenagers, and almost none of them are queer or trans. It is great to know that cisgender teenagers today are open to a book such as *I am J*. They are reading it and reviewing it, and they invited me to write for their blog community. It is surprising and fun for me to be interacting with these young entrepreneurs who are running their own little web empire.

Carbotti: This is all very interesting for me, especially in relation to the study of modes of production and reception of queer literature. When I interviewed Jewelle Gomez on *The Gilda Stories*, she talked about how many young queers today do not seem to be that interested in the history of queer literature. They do not seem to look at older texts to trace a genealogy of queer identities in the same way that the previous generation did. If we look at queer literary scholarship in the Eighties and Nineties, much emphasis was put on rediscovering the hidden history and legacy of gay, lesbian and trans intellectuals. Rewriting the canon was a primary concern, and people turned to books like *Stone Butch Blues* to find representation of their experiences and connect the dots with the past. There seemed to be a need to reconcile the present with the past and to find a queer philosophical and literary lineage.

From what you describe, kids today seem to be more interested in other forms of knowledge production, they are focused on new and interactive forms of transmission, mainly thanks to the aid of the Internet. How do you see these evolutions and changes in perspective?

Beam: I see queer literature diversifying, and this is very exciting for me. We're getting more books in a much wider range of perspectives, genres and topics. I think that the form of the stories and even the way we think of stories is going to change. It is hard to predict the future, but I agree with you that people are not reading in the same way that we did, for example. In the college classes that I teach now, I have so many students that are not reading books as part of their work. I certainly do not think that the format of the book is dead, but I do not feel that there is the same hunger that our generation had when we turned to books, asking ourselves: "Where is the reflection of my own experience? Where can I find myself?", and then we found that one book that spoke to us and we cherished it. Kids today can go online and see pictures and videos and get that sense of relief that we looked for in the written page. There isn't that same desperation that our generation experienced. This may change storytelling, and I do not know how exactly, but it may allow for more kinds of voices to find an avenue for expressing themselves. Let's take for example the way the book tour for *Transparent* worked: the book comes out and you go and present it in certain cities, wherever they can afford to invite you, and you read from the book. So I went to the coasts, often with Christina, and shared my experience and work with the people who came. With *I am J*, there is a blog tour, which is partly due to negative contingencies, because people do not have the money to invite you for a book tour anymore. But this also brings about change and positive consequences. When they invite you, you post as a guest for one of these literary blogs, which are all in communication with each other. There is an ongoing dialogue that could never be initiated in the past, when you went to one specific location and talked about the book. The online interactive conversation today becomes its own kind of story, and it is the feedback, comments, all the narrative interstices that make the dialogue alive and interesting today. The communication between people and books becomes the true book, the true story today. Reading is not anymore about a person sitting and reading singularly, it has become a communal practice that reinvents stories and circulates them in a new way.

Carbotti: So we go back to our discussion about genres and forms of literary production undergoing a metamorphosis. It looks like, again, the subject makes the form change as well. Embracing this idea of transformation

allows you to enter a space where you deal with things differently on all levels. How does the idea of bodily metamorphosis in queer narratives affect our perception of a changing society and a revised history on a broader level than just learning the story of a person taking hormones to make changes in his or her body?

Beam: Thinking of metamorphosis in this way is important because it is a figuration that allows you to see social issues as dialectic. The point is not telling the story of a caterpillar that becomes a butterfly, but opening your eyes to the butterfly effect. Like in Edward Lorenz's theory of chaos, we detect the changes that can happen when a butterfly flaps her wings in Brazil, setting off a tornado in Texas. Any small change can have a dramatic impact on society as a whole. Telling stories is about making these small changes known. Sometimes these changes are subtle, but eventually we have to account for them. Social changes affect policies, because as soon as we register a transformation the world needs to adjust and make space for the new, regardless of the different political positions that surround these progresses. But society also transforms at the level of symbolic imagination as new realities become visible and available. Imagining new possibilities in this perspective can become a wider, more inclusive social practice. So thinking metamorphosis becomes a method of seeing what's at stake in society today.

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The interview

Date submitted: 30/06/2011

Date accepted: 30/09/2011

Date published: 30/11/2011

How to quote this interview

Carbotti, Rossella, "Becoming Transparent: A Conversation with Cris Beam", *Between*, I.2 (2011), <http://www.between-journal.it>