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**Grace, Laura Jane. *Tranny: Confessions of Punk Rock's Most Infamous Anarchist Sellout*. New York: Hachette, 2016. 320 pp. ISBN: 9780316387958. £13.99. Print.**

**Gina Maya**

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*In her autobiography Tranny (2016), punk singer/songwriter Laura Jane Grace explores the excesses of two forms of subversion, against the music industry, and heteronormativity as a transgender woman. In the following review, Gina Maya analyses the implications of her experiences as a counter-cultural icon.*

If punk is a genre of counterculture, then what to make of Laura Jane Grace, the punk singer/songwriter whose autobiography *Tranny* (2016) came out last year. As a study of the politics of subversive identities, Grace records the rise to commercial success of her punk band *Against Me!* and her coming to terms with her transgender identity. The result is a valuable insight both into the urgency and limitations of countercultural self-expression.

The biography includes reflections of both her punk principles and her gender transition with a mixture of pride and frustration. Violence is a regular feature of her early life, Grace recounting the bullying at school of which she regularly suffered. Simultaneously, she describes how the 'nihilism' and 'self-destructive nature' of punk rock served as her catharsis, before her experience of police brutality while a teenager give added meaning to punk as philosophy: 'Fuck MTV,' says Grace of her epiphany at fifteen years of age, 'and fuck major labels. Fuck commercial art. Fuck the whole capitalist system! I wanted nothing to do with any of it.' Grace appears to take easily to punk and to songwriting, but as she says of her reluctance to confide in anyone about her gender anxieties, 'in the radical activist punk scene . . . gender identity was still a taboo.'

A feature of her narrative is the fear of selling out. With punk, this has implications that threaten her safety. Upon the band's growing financial success, hardcore fans turn against her, to the point of stalking her band at concerts, slashing tyres and yelling abuse from strategic positions in the front row. Similarly, after coming out as a transgender woman, Grace reflects on the pressure of conformity as she begins to have doubts about continuing her transition: 'The trans community would full-on excommunicate me as well. I'd seen it happen to other trans people who decided to de-transition. It was a crime akin to a punk band selling out to a major label.'

The welcome she receives from the transgender community, as with the punk community, comes with conditions of loyalty, implicit or otherwise. Her absorption into a trans community, however, has its own distinctive dynamic, involving a tense relationship not with police but with the medical services as she seeks hormone therapy. The personal cost is also noticeably greater, as she loses contact with her father, while her marriage unravels. On beginning to live full-time as a woman, she reveals her wife's description of her as 'a shell of the person I used to be. I was no longer the cocky,

loudmouth punk . . .’ The trans community becomes in turn far more a refuge than the punk scene for Grace as her transitioning impacts on her socially and professionally.

One key question, in reference to correlation, is how her coming out as trans affects her punk and broader anti-capitalist beliefs. Slavoj Žižek, like Grace a critic of capitalism, blames the phenomena of identity politics as a distraction from the struggle to challenge the capitalist system. ‘(S)ubjects,’ says Žižek, ‘increasingly stick to their particular substantial identity, unwilling to sacrifice it from some universal Cause . . . So we are fighting our PC battles for the rights of ethnic minorities, of gays and lesbians, of different lifestyles, and so on.’ For Žižek, identities of such communities as LGBT, feminism, and black, minority, ethnic (BME) while to some degree laudable, are not only ultimately cosmetic but a product of capitalism, ‘which clearly favour the mode of subjectivity characterized by multiple shifting identities.’ These identities, for Žižek, in fact isolate people, and diminish the opportunities for social change.

Yet Grace’s autobiography, in respect to such criticism, serves more as refutation than a confirmation. For one, the idea of trans as part of ‘multiple shifting identities’ doesn’t reflect Grace’s experience of trans as journey and fulfillment of a lifetime of repression. For almost the whole of her life, in fact, Grace remains in the closet, desperate to maintain the kind of semblance of heteronormativity that Žižek appears to value as a precursor for social change. The impact of such repression on Grace’s mental and physical wellbeing is hardly cosmetic.

Žižek’s use of ‘lifestyle’ is similarly problematic in view of the suffering Grace subjects herself to. The constant use of drugs, for example, becomes one of Grace’s methods of numbing her sense of dysphoria, while the idea of committing suicide is broached. As repression of her self-expression becomes impossible, and the prospect of exiting the heteronormative life appears inevitable, she isolates herself in motel rooms. It is here that she attempts to control her desire through bouts of cross-dressing, though the restricted act is always followed by guilt and self-loathing. When she does come out publicly, many of those close to her abandon her. Of a particular source of anguish and humiliation is her attempt to prove to the medical establishment that her dysphoria is legitimate. Her sanity, she feels, is questioned, and the examinations she is subjected to take on the form of a kind of trial. During none of this journey, from self-awareness as a toddler to her adult life as anguished father and husband, do we sense an alternative lifestyle is being indulged, but instead something fundamental to her nature is being repressed and forced against itself.

What Grace’s journey demonstrates instead is how being transgender and having radical political views is – contrary to Žižek’s apparent position – not mutually exclusive. As she re-assembles her band as a transgender woman, for example, Grace expresses her admiration for one particular new member, for their ‘anarchist philosophies.’ Music and politics for Grace intertwine from beginning to end, containing recurring expressions of her dislike for capitalism and police brutality. Her embrace of both her new, public self-expression as female, and the transgender community she begins to learn about, do not distil her radicalism, but allow her access to new perspectives to her subversive ideals, while evidently bringing her peace of mind.

## Works Cited

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Grace, Laura Jane. *Tranny: Confessions of Punk Rock's Most Infamous Anarchist Sellout*. New York: Hachette, 2016. Print.

## Author Biography

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Gina Maya is a second year English PhD candidate at the University of Edinburgh. Her research interests are transgender narratives in pop culture in the twenty-first century. Her published works include a review of *Transgender and Intersex: Theoretical, Practical, and Artistic Perspectives* (MacMillan, 2016) in Routledge's *Norma: International Journal for Masculinity Studies*, and her first novel, *Utopia in Danzig* (2016). In her free time, Gina keeps a weekly blog on her website [www.ginamaya.co.uk](http://www.ginamaya.co.uk), where she writes about cinema as well as her experience of transitioning in Edinburgh.