

Introduction: On the art of crossing over and what lies beyond

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Alan Moore, has often proclaimed Northampton as the epicentre of England.¹ A crossroads geographically, economically, politically and culturally. Northampton, Moore says, ‘is practically equidistant from every coast, which means that it is right at the centre of the country’.² A perfect place then, a literal and figurative meeting place, to host an event – a convocation – intended to bridge a multitude of perceived boundaries and bring about a valuable confluence of leading esoterically-inclined academics, independent scholars, magical practitioners, and artists – all united by a shared enthusiasm for both the study and production of contemporary occulture.³

In September 2016, this groundbreaking event was held – *Trans- States: The art of crossing over*. It was an experimental, transdisciplinary⁴ conference that explored the representation, and influence, within contemporary culture of esotericism, mysticism, spirituality, alterations of consciousness and other paranormal experiences.

[trans-] prefix meaning: across; beyond; through; on the other side of; to go beyond.⁵

[state]: a condition or way of being that exists at a particular time.⁶

A shameless pun, a ‘trans- state’ (playing on ‘trance state’) is a *coincidentia oppositorum*: an interdependent and unified coincidence of opposites. It is an alchemical wedding that defines the *fixed* place, where boundaries are *actively* transgressed. In many ways, this point of intersection, this crossroads, is where the role of the magician, mystic and artist collide.

The liminal⁷ domain of the crossroads, and its status as ‘neither here nor there’, has been of huge magical and mythological significance long before the term intersectional transitioned into the vernacular. ‘The Greeks, Romans and many other ancient civilizations regarded both natural and man-made liminal points of all kinds – doors, gates, rivers and frontiers, as well as cross roads – as uncertain places, requiring special rituals’.⁸ Two liminal Greek deities of particular note are: Hekate, ‘who guided and guarded during transitions of all types’,⁹ goddess of the crossroads, of moon and magic, and of restless ghosts neither living nor dead;¹⁰ and, the quintessential divine trickster himself, Hermes, god of boundaries (and

the transgression of boundaries) and communication, patron of thieves, graves, heralds, commerce and travellers – also intimately connected to the crossroads.¹¹ The connection being that the ‘name Hermes is probably derived from the Greek word for ‘stone-heap’, *herma*’. Located at crossroads, roadsides and other liminal thresholds, they demarcated boundaries and territory¹², as well as ‘marking a point of communication between strangers’.¹³ Similarly, *Hekataia* (apotropaic statues of Hekate) were to be found at crossroads, doors, gates and other thresholds.

Boundaries divide the vast totality of unity into the ‘here’ and the ‘beyond’, and produce new frontiers, *beyond* which lies mysterious Otherness.¹⁴ When boundaries shift, and even dissolve (and they must), there is a loss of identity and definition, but, subsequently, there is also the creation of novel potentialities and occasion for the discovery of the not-yet-known: *Solve et coagula*. As Jungian Psychoanalyst Murray Stein elucidates:

Hermes stood at the edge of known space [. . .] beyond the boundary lies the unknown, the uncanny, the dangerous, the unconscious. When markers are created and limits set, however, curiosity and exploration are also excited, and new spaces for exploration and discovery invite the bold and courageous traveler. If Hermes marks the boundary [. . .] we have to realize that this boundary is always shifting and in flux; it is mercurial.¹⁵

Trans- States, in addition to being a liminal ‘point of communication between strangers’ in itself, was a queered space: a deviant counterspace spectacularly secreted¹⁶ within a normative¹⁷ academic institution. And it is in the occupying of liminal and marginal spaces, and in the transgressing of norms and normativity, where the ‘magic happens’ (although it will remain unresolvable whether that be literally, figuratively, or both), and so this was the focus and theme of the conference: boundary crossing, liminality and the queering of normativity. As the conference material declared, ‘down at the crossroads, where possibilities are collapsed into actualities, by the wondrous act of a conscious decision: there lies the place of suffering and surrender; of realisation and redemption’.¹⁸

This volume features a collection of essays inspired by, and in some cases developed directly from, the *Trans- States* conference. Our contributors offer different perspectives on work produced by artists undergoing – or seeking – alterations in consciousness; on art created for the very purpose of bringing about transformations in the artist, the wider culture, and even: reality itself.

The vision, and desire, to create *Trans- States* emerged partly because I find this meeting of modalities within myself: academic, artist (filmmaker specifically) and magician (although, for the record, I am both a skeptic and agnostic). Each of these deserves some consideration, but it is also important to recognise they share at least one extremely important attribute in common – the scholar, the artist and the magician all engage in the defining and re-defining of invisible boundaries that help formulate our understanding of the world, of this so-called ‘reality’. Students of philosophy are aware that knowledge claims of objective reality are very slippery things, and whilst I am among the huge cohort that tend to accept that the existence of an underlying objective reality is a reasonable assumption, I prefer to deal in the plurality of realities that I actually encounter. I recognise that any given monolithic account of ‘reality’ – just as with any other category – is, when placed under scrutiny: ambiguous, mercurial and open to continuous critique and revision.¹⁹

As Billy Rowan (aka The Undercover Hippy, a musician that I produced a promotional music video for in 2014) so clearly articulates in his song, ‘Borders:’

I know that sometimes
You have to draw the lines
Just to make sense of what you see
Of this reality
But understand the lines you draw
Only exist within your mind.²⁰

The fuzzy, imprecise and profoundly contested nature of taxonomies is also deeply embedded in my own personal experience. Not least of all, I was born and (primarily) raised in Northern Ireland, a place where the intangible concept of political borders has long-since had very tangible, and dire, consequences. At the time of writing this, with the advent of Brexit, I am currently hearing about the ‘Irish border problem’ on a near daily basis, yet, there is a positionality to that view. As comedian Andrew Maxwell quipped, ‘it's not the Irish border, it's the British border. . . in Ireland. The Irish border is the beach’.²¹ All a matter of perspective.

The academy, and wider scholarly discourse, is continuously negotiating and revising categories of thought, concepts, and the interpretation of data to best express an ongoing account of the world, relying on a weight of evidence and appealing to logic and reason. The art world, and the wider field of creative cultural production, is continuously negotiating and

revising our value systems, sociocultural capital, and nonrational forms of meaning production to best express ourselves within the world, appealing to emotions and passions. Of course, not even these distinctions are this clear and unambiguous. Academia also informs and transforms value systems, affords sociocultural capital and impacts on nonrational meaning-making (and vice versa with respect to artistic modes). If one is in any doubt of this, simply take note of the huge impact concepts from the academy, such as intersectionality, gender essentialism and social constructionism are having on a daily basis at this current time; frequently, in deeply emotive, nonrational ways that trade heavily in sociocultural capital.

Categories and borders (like identities and definitions) can seem fixed, but in reality they are fluid. They are in a dialectic with that which falls outside their demarcation; they are continuously negotiated and any apparent stability is demonstrably transient.²²

Each of the authors in this volume – whether they be scholars, magical practitioners, artists, or some blend thereof – investigate, negotiate, deconstruct and transgress the various boundaries that normative ontological dualism projects onto the world. Between: self and other; subject and object; fact and fiction; imagined and real; revelation and reason; the sublime and the mundane; the Heavens and the Earth; even, the living and the dead. Whether we are dealing with truly distinct dialectical binaries or interdependent and unified, monist, coincidences of opposition that only appear separate, it is when boundaries are blurred – when up is down, and black is white – that experiences of the paranormal, the unknown, the uncanny, the tricksterish, the troublesome, and even the downright dangerous, bleed through.²³

One particular *coincidentia oppositorum*, and theme of note, that emerges more generally from the interplay of ideas in this text, considered directly in Carlos Ruiz Brussain's chapter, 'Within the *Hyperdream* Magic Circle: Manifesting the unconscious through illustration games', is the boundary-blurring phenomenon of 'serious play'. In Brussain's analysis of his practice he deliberates that, although one might consider defining play precisely in terms of its lack of seriousness, in fact, play could be the serious activity *par excellence*; moreover, perhaps it is somehow both, where the ambiguous character of play is necessarily both serious and not serious, all at once. As perceptual and categorical disruptors, he argues, art, play and magic are almost indistinguishable.

The concept of serious play has a long usage in the academy (as far back as 1933, and most likely even earlier), in Education, Psychology, Architecture-Design, and the Arts.²⁴ In her seminal text *Gender Trouble* (1990), Judith Butler problematised the power dynamics at

play in the construction of gender binaries, noting that ‘laughter in the face of serious categories is indispensable for feminism. Without a doubt, feminism continues to require its own forms of serious play’.²⁵ Self-ascribed ‘troublemaker’ that Butler is, nearly three decades later her proposed practices to ‘disrupt the categories of the body, sex, gender, and sexuality and occasion their subversive resignification and proliferation beyond the binary frame’ have certainly *played* a very *serious* role in the transforming and provoking the sociopolitical and cultural landscapes of the (so-called) Western world.²⁶

And therein lies another contestable and troublesome category: ‘the West’. In Georgia van Raalte’s offering in this volume, ‘Hermes and the Spider God: Invisible texts and hidden subjectivities in the study of esotericism’, the distinction of esotericism, rather than Western esotericism, is very purposeful – and is explicated in a piece of writing that has intentionally blurred its own boundaries, ‘somewhere between an opinion piece and academia proper [. . .] in an uncomfortable space between critique and speculation’. Analysing the reception of Zora Neale Hurston’s *Tell My Horse* (1939), the Western/non-Western divide in the contemporary study of esotericism is problematised, along with ‘the Western academy’s continuing colonial blindness’. Critique of the terminological inclusion of ‘Western’ in ‘Western esotericism’ has a notable history already,²⁷ but van Raalte takes the problematisation of categories even further; into a consideration of the limits of ‘objectivity’ and ‘subjectivity’ themselves, and into the thorny issue of the scholar-practitioner divide.

Such a divide is certainly no concern for the co-authored contribution of Jasmine Shadrack, Charmaine Sonnex and Chris A. Roe, ‘Ritual Occultation and the Space between Worlds: Exploring the discursive nature of the ‘flow’ state in Black Metal and Pagan performative practice’. Here the authors find common ground in their collective research, despite the differences in their disciplinary and methodological approaches. Social science, encounters a performance/practitioner-based analytical framework, utilising thematic analysis of qualitative data and interpretive autoethnography, respectively. The ‘bridge’ in the perceived space between these ‘worlds’, is the ‘transcendental performativity’ that Pagan ritual practice and ‘ritual occultation’ both afford – the authors then theorise this encompassing aspect of performativity in terms of Csikszentmihalyi’s concept of ‘flow’, and the art, pageantry, play and ritual that both practices engage with.²⁸

Collaboration leads us thematically to the focus of Richard Kaczynski’s chapter, ‘Transmutation and Transmission of a New Iconography in the Thoth Tarot’. *Trans- States* itself employs the visually sublime – and now classic – imagery of the Thoth tarot deck; *Atu XII - The Hanged Man*, (1938–40) features on the front cover of this volume and was

likewise used on all the conference's promotional material. The Thoth deck was created as a collaborative effort between Aleister Crowley (1875–1947) and 'the deck's underappreciated partner', Frieda Lady Harris (1877–1962). I have always taken issue with the marginalisation of Frieda Harris's monumental importance to the production of this highly influential deck, and Kaczynski was invited to address, and redress, this appalling lack of emphasis on her important contribution. As much as one might wish that this is simply a result of the vast shadow cast by the truly infamous Crowley, the similar 'overlooking' of Harris's equally important contemporary, and notably *female*, artist Pamela 'Pixie' Colman Smith (1878–1951) with respect to the insultingly named Rider-Waite tarot deck, paints a rather different picture (I won't ask to be excused the pun). This chapter presents an insightful historical overview of Harris's creative process and the playful collaborative interchange between the deck's two architects.

Laura Thursby's chapter, 'Blurs from Beyond: UFO photography and the imagination', is equally concerned with meaning-making and imagery in an analysis of the necessarily inconclusive epistemological status of UFOs that have been, ostensibly, captured on camera. Thursby questions how, with seemingly little regard for the fact that the *U* in UFO stands for *unidentified*, the term 'became synonymous with extraterrestrial spacecraft', and what this liminal status of unidentifiable tells us about those who either proclaim, or deny, their extraterrestriality or the 'plurality of worlds', with absolute certainty.²⁹

Then, there are those artists who seem to, themselves, embody the very rebellious and re-visionary nature of the trickster. So it is with Przybyszewski, whom Per Faxneld scrutinises in 'The Naked Soul: Ecstasy, elitism and secrecy in the work of Stanislaw Przybyszewski'. Faxneld demonstrates how Przybyszewski saw art as 'the exclusive domain of an ecstatic occult elite' who create in Satan's name, making him, arguably, 'the first person ever to consistently formulate and spread a system of thought centred around Satan as a positive symbol' and perhaps even bestow the distinction of being the first 'true' Satanist. Przybyszewski believed that such art transcended false binaries – another heavily recurring theme in this volume – but that it was also rarefied and exceptional, secreted by the exclusivity of the ecstatic dimensions that the artist must traverse.

Not entirely dissimilarly, Joséphin Péladan, examined in Sasha Chaitow's chapter, 'Saving the Lives of Angels: Joséphin Péladan's vision for redemption through the arts', re-visioned 'Lucifer and his progeny as the true creators and saviours of humankind'. In this instance, however, the revolutionary Péladan was desirous of the democratisation of spiritual evolution through divine artistic practice: 'Art, which seeks God through Beauty'. By way of

a complex and beautiful counternarrative to the orthodox doctrine of original sin, he sought to offer a new cosmological framework within which ‘a social renaissance would be ignited, and humanity would discover its divine origins’.

Rebekah Sheldon’s offering, ‘Knowledge, Affect, and Ritual Magic’ also observes the revolutionary drive and notes that ‘it is not only magicians who seek to discover how to produce new ages, but scholars too’. She explores how the practice of magic strives to realise systemic transformation, and so to do emancipatory forms of scholarship like critical theory. She considers how understanding scholarship *as* magic carries with it important implications for how and why we pursue scholarship and for our ideas about what magic itself is. By way of analysing ritual magic, Thelema, and in particular Jack Parsons’ now infamous ‘Babalon Working’, in relation to knowledge production and the experiential materiality of embodied ritual participants – of motion, vibration and resonance – Sheldon proposes affect theory as a valuable and insightful point of convergence for correlating seemingly different forms of ‘future production’.

Finally, our two remaining contributions continue with the theme of embodiment and the contested site of power and expression in the world that is the frontier of the flesh. To invoke Judith Butler once again, ‘the body is not a “being”, but a variable boundary, a surface whose permeability is politically regulated, a signifying practice within a cultural field’.³⁰

Stefanie Elrick offers an exegesis of her performance art piece, *Written is Skin*, in her chapter, ‘Black Wholes and Dark Continents: Flesh as a language frontier’, where she makes just this assertion. It is her contention that during her performance she ‘embodied an alternative language frontier’; once again, an artist in this volume is engaging in re-visionary practice, in this instance, seeking to disrupt the phallogentric parameters of dominant language structures. She underwent an intentional transmutation of suffering through this reflexive rite of passage, and, in doing so, provided ‘a poetic potential space for transformation’. Performance art, Elrick argues, is uniquely suited to the task because the language of our bodies, innate and affective, is ‘freed from the fetters of intellectualism’. *Written in Skin* was an exercise in reifying the abstract, the immaterial, and literally embodying it: love, desire, pain and poetry, all transcribed in an act of intimacy and extroversion.

And so to our last, ‘*Modern Angels: Exploring transdermal body art and body modification as transformative practice and political resistance*’, wherein Roy Wallace gives a critical account of his documentary film, exploring the ‘body art’ scene in Belgium at the turn of the second millennium. Wallace’s analysis asserts body modification as inherently

political, either by way of the demarcation of dominant power relationships through systematic control and degradation of the individual, or by the self-ascribing of the language frontier of the body as part of the resistive strategy against dominant (patriarchal) hegemony. It was the latter that Wallace's daring and inquisitive production documented in Belgium body art scene. 'Individuals seeking control of their own destiny' by self-initiating a mentally and physically transformative act that necessitates both resistance and surrender: resistance to hegemonic normativity and dominant power structures, and surrender to the felt presence of immediate experience.³¹

In conclusion: a multitude of 'trans- states', are experienced, discovered, expressed, embodied, performed, mediated, revealed and concealed within our occulture, but they do share some measure of parity. They are by their very nature queer, non-normative, deviant and 'other', in some sense; they all possess the quality of the exceptional and expedite the transformative. They all fall within the liminal domain of transitional (dis)juncture – between normative, defined, structured and bounded areas. Like Hermes before them, the re-visionary agents of change that practice 'the art of crossing over' are those, that by virtue of that very practice, *herald the presence of difference*.³² Now, let's find the 'others'. The stakes are serious; let's see how it plays out.

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¹ See both of Moore's novels *Voice in the Fire* and *Jerusalem*. Also see Gravett, 'Alan Moore: Three go mad in. . .'; Le Marie, 'Renowned writer Alan'; Schmidt, 'Northampton - Centre of the World'.

² Moore, in Gravett, 'Alan Moore: Three go mad in. . .'.

³ The term occulture was first coined by Genesis P-Orridge: artist, esotericist and self-styled 'cultural engineer'. Occulture has since been repurposed by scholars of esotericism, introduced first as a sociological category by Partridge in *The Re-Enchantment of the West*. Partridge initially came across the term in McKay's *Senseless Acts of Beauty*, but subsequently traced it back to P-Orridge, who he has now written about at some length.

⁴ Transdisciplinary differs from interdisciplinary, in that it seeks to go further than collaborating between, integrating and applying multiple disciplines – its goal is to facilitate a kind of holistic synthesis emergent from the interplay of all included disciplines. The category-defying nature of a transdisciplinary approach and our adoption of it is, of course, very far from accidental.

⁵ Douglas Harper, ‘trans-’, *Online Etymology Dictionary*, accessed November 1 2015. <https://www.etymonline.com/word/trans->

⁶ ‘state’, *Cambridge Dictionary*, accessed November 1 2015. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/state>

⁷ Liminality is a key concept in this volume, for a good grounding in the usage of this valuable anthropological term, see Turner, ‘Liminality and Communitas’, 94–130.

⁸ Johnston, ‘Crossroads’, 217.

⁹ Johnston, ‘Crossroads’, 218.

¹⁰ Many of the now popular features of Hekate arise more clearly from Hellenistic times onwards; evidence with respect to ancient Hekate cults is (understandably) less abundant. For a detailed examination of Hekate see Ronan, *The Goddess Hekate* and Johnston, ‘Hekate soteira’.

¹¹ Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 156–58.

¹² Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 156; Johnston, ‘Crossroads’, 220; Stein, *Soul: Treatment and Recovery*, 43–44; Brown, *Hermes the Thief*, 32.

¹³ Brown, *Hermes the Thief*, 32. Brown notes that Hermes is not the only divine trickster to have a ‘connection with the magic practices regulating communication with strangers’, providing evidence of Native American and Australian aborigines utilising rituals connected with divine trickster for the purposes of ceremonial contact between tribes. See, *Hermes the Thief*, 34.

¹⁴ I am indebted to Murray Stein here for providing a psychological analysis that aligns with my own ideas regarding creativity and (in my formulation, ineffable) Otherness, and, consequently, helping provide such succinct explication. See, Stein, *Soul: Treatment and Recovery*, 44–45 and McLaughlin, ‘Occultural intrusions’.

¹⁵ Stein, *Soul: Treatment and Recovery*, 44.

¹⁶ For a full definition of the phrase ‘spectacular secrecy’ and its inherent relationship with occulture, see Bratich, ‘Popular Secrecy and Occultural Studies’, 42–58.

¹⁷ For those unsure of the precise difference between the terms norm, normal and normative, sociologists (for the most part) define them thusly: norms relate to social contracts, the standard, model action – they are the rules that guide social behaviour; normal need not relate to action, but simply statistical frequency, and relates to the ‘state’ of ‘being normal’, and socially speaking, by adhering to norms, one is *being normal*; the normative pertains to the perception or judgement of what we think *ought* to be normal, it is prescriptive, often enforced somehow; moreover, it is commonly morally determined.

¹⁸ Trans-states.org, accessed July 12, 2018, <http://trans-states.org/>

¹⁹ I find myself influenced by Robert Anton Wilson’s valuable framework of Maybe Logic, following Korzybski’s declamation that ‘a map is not the territory’, Wilson’s approach ‘emphasizes the fallibility of relativity of perception and tends to approach information and observations with questions, probabilities and multiple perspectives rather than absolute truths’. See Korzybski, *Science and Sanity*; the Maybe Logic definition is from the online Maybe Logic Academy, no longer active, but cited here from Cusack, *Invented Religions*, 106. For a further interpretation on a ‘plurality of realities’, see Chwistek, *The Plurality of Realities*.

²⁰ Undercover Hippy, ‘Borders’.

²¹ Andrew Maxwell. 2018. *The News Quiz*. BBC Radio 4, Series 97 Episode 4, September 21, 2018.

²² Castells, *Power of identity*.

²³ For a detailed analysis of the interplay between mutability, ambiguity, the blurring of boundaries and the paranormal, see Hansen, *The Trickster and the Paranormal*. Hansen's text is also briefly summarised by Georgia Van Raalte in her chapter herein, 'Hermes and The Spider God'. I am forever indebted to Georgia for bringing Hansen's text to my attention; a work that resonates deeply with my own thought.

²⁴ The earliest journal article that I unearthed with a strong focus on serious play was, Kerschbaum 'The serious play of adolescents', 1933. Notable recent academic volumes include: Beavis, *Serious Play: Literacy, learning and digital games*; Bogad, *Tactical Performance: Serious play and social movements* and Peacock, *Serious play: Modern clown performance*.

²⁵ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, xxx.

²⁶ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, xxxiv.

²⁷ For an excellent breakdown of this ongoing debate, see Aspren, 'Beyond the West', 3–33.

²⁸ (Serious) play and Csikszentmihalyi's concept of 'flow', are both areas of investigation that have arisen independently within different contributions to the conference, and, consequently, this volume. Indeed, Csikszentmihalyi's concept of flow is also a key concept in Carlos Ruiz Brussain's chapter here, and in his broader research.

²⁹ 'The historical term out of which the extraterrestrial life debate grew is "plurality of worlds", which first appeared in ancient Greece in the extreme form of the concept of infinite worlds (*aperio kosmoi*), became known in the Latin West as the question of many worlds (*plures mundi*), and was translated into the English, French and German vernacular'. Dick, *Plurality of Worlds*, 2. I find it enormously fascinating how the 'many-worlds interpretation' of quantum mechanics seems to almost reassert this ancient cosmological tradition.

³⁰ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 189.

³¹ This poetic phraseology is borrowed from its innumerable utterances, by psychonaut and countercultural icon, Terence 'The Bard' McKenna. For an example, see 'Reclaim Your Mind [Terence McKenna]', YouTube video, 2:01, audio from a Q&A session after a presentation called 'What Science Forgot' n.d., posted by 'N K' July 22, 2013,

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bRn_7aMoX0Y.

³² This term, 'presence of difference', is borrowed from Hebdige, *Subculture: The meaning of style*, 3.