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**Limitations and Possibilities:  
Representations of Gender Transition in Western Fiction, 1928-2018**

A thesis  
submitted in fulfilment  
of the requirements for the degree  
of  
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## Abstract

This thesis seeks to understand how fictional texts encounter queer genders and what they have to say about what it means to be trans\* or have nonconforming gender. Identifying and critiquing the tropes and conventions at work in a selection of Western fictional transition narratives ranging in publication from 1928 to 2018, this thesis operates as a journey of pursuit and discovery, searching for texts that destabilise hegemonic understandings of gender. With a focus on the value of challenging stereotypes, resisting binaries and embracing notions of fluidity and multiplicity, this thesis begins by interrogating texts that fail to disturb the status quo. The thesis then compares popular genre fiction novels with twentieth-century literary fiction to reveal the complex possibilities available for exploring and representing gender identity, asking the questions, “what is failing in popular fiction representations?”, “how is it failing?” and “why is it failing?”

This thesis offers careful analysis of contemporary popular genre fiction narratives published since 2000. All these texts focus on moments and processes of transition. The limitations of these narratives are then juxtaposed with Armistead Maupin’s nine-book series *Tales of the City* and the twentieth-century literary fiction of Angela Carter and Virginia Woolf. By interrogating the patterns of representation emerging from contemporary popular genre texts and comparing them with Maupin’s attempts at subversion and the complexity at work in Woolf’s and Carter’s writing, this thesis reveals that texts failing to resist dominant ideologies are too concerned with offering safe and sympathetic portrayals that follow the rules of literary tradition and reinforce social expectations of gender. These texts pathologise trans\* experience, rely on closed narrative conventions and repeat interchangeable messages about safety, conformity and congruence. Overall, this thesis reveals a pattern of increasing conservatism over time. The inclusion of Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* and Angela Carter’s *The*

*Passion of New Eve* exemplify possibilities for queering both narrative and representation when, instead of being concerned about issues such as social acceptance and political correctness, texts focus on the power of experimentation, destabilisation and subversion.

Gender, like concepts of the self, is an ongoing process – it is capable of being fluid and multiple, of disrupting hegemonic expectations of consistency and congruence. This thesis argues that this complexity can best be explored in fictional representations that seek to deconstruct not just gender but also literary tradition itself.

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## Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my cousin—my brother from another mother—Eli. I am so proud of you and the steps you have taken to be your incredible self. I hope your story will inspire others to be bold and live their best lives.

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## Introduction

Questions of gender have always perplexed me. The roles, expectations and stereotypes surrounding gender have encouraged me to question what it means to be a gendered individual in society and what other diverse ways there are possible to experience gender. Growing up, I was surrounded by binary, heteronormative ideologies. I thought there were males and females, that males had penises and females had vaginas. I believed that men could not wear dresses although women could wear pants. As I ventured into the world and met more people, I discovered gendered alternatives that pushed my thinking beyond these binaries. I learned about people who cross genders and cross dress, people who change their bodies and identify away from the labels assigned to them at birth. I discovered identities that encompass both masculine and feminine as well as spaces between and outside of this dichotomy. I learned that it is possible to identify as multiple genders, as without gender, as outside conventional gender structures. I learned about my own queer gender, one that, although primarily feminine, is also hybrid and fluctuates through masculine and androgynous spaces. I have learned through similar fluctuations in my sexual identity that concepts of the self can operate as an ongoing process with limitless potential for ways of being. Having witnessed so much diversity around me and identifying my own impetus to queer other's expectations of and perceptions about me, I began to wonder why I had not encountered queer genders earlier in my life – neither in the people I knew nor in the books I read or the movies I watched. I was driven by a thirst to learn more about what it means to have queer gender, what it means to transition genders, to defy conventional gender structures and find new ways of being. It was time to find new books to read.

My thesis topic is one that is very close to my heart. As Carrie Burnell argues, in *I Am Not A Label*, “[e]veryone deserves to see someone like them in a story or achieving

something great. Representation matters, because magical things happen when we see ourselves in books, films or on stage” (Burnell, “Introduction,” par. 2). This thesis journey is not just a search for myself in fiction; it is a search for diverse representations of the many shapes and forms that gender can take. My topic is one that I have had to navigate as both an insider and an outsider. I am an insider because I am a queer woman who has experienced multiple shifting identities. I am a proudly fluid, genderqueer lesbian searching for texts that reflect my own experiences of gender, which, by its own nature, defies stereotypical and binary understandings of femininity and masculinity. I am a gender bender, which is only possible since, as Feinberg argues, “[y]ou can only be considered gender-bent in a society that is gender-rigid” (*Warriors* 97). In this way, I am an insider to the practice of challenging the social stigmas and stereotypes of binary gender. However, I am also an outsider in this thesis because I have not experienced a process of transition and I do not identify away from the gender I was assigned at birth.

My thesis journey is also one that can be characterised by a tension between my passion for the rights of queer people and my position as a scholar. Throughout this thesis, I strive to maintain a balance between my position as queer, a trans\* ally and an advocate for people with nonconforming gender identities, and my role in providing analytic scholarship that does justice to the lives represented by trans\* fiction. This thesis seeks to understand how fictional texts encounter queer genders and what they have to say about what it means to be trans\* or have nonconforming gender. Identifying and critiquing the tropes and conventions at work in a selection of Western fictional transition narratives ranging in publication from 1928 to 2018, this thesis operates as a journey of pursuit and discovery, searching for texts that destabilise hegemonic understandings of gender. With a focus on the value of challenging stereotypes, resisting binaries and embracing notions of fluidity and multiplicity, this thesis begins by interrogating texts that fail to disturb the status quo. When I began my

thesis journey, I expected to find contemporary texts that performed this kind of destabilising work, but read text after text that, while celebrating trans\* experience, also depicted trans\* characters in a repetitive and reductive way. Out of this encounter my thesis questions emerged: “what is failing in popular genre fiction representations of trans\* experience?”, “how is it failing?” and “why is it failing?” To answer these questions, I juxtapose popular genre fiction novels with twentieth-century literary fiction to exemplify the complex possibilities available for exploring and representing gender identity.

### Reading Ahead: The Shape of This Thesis

Characters who move away from their birth-assigned gender have existed in written texts for centuries. Indeed, “thousands of books, essays, and field research cite transgender, bigender, transsexuality, and intersexuality in societies on every continent, in every stage of development” (Feinberg, *Warriors* 47). This thesis engages with a very small portion of the representations available on queer gender identities. Focusing its core analyses on fictional Western texts from the year 1928 to the year 2018, this thesis examines and critiques representations in English of characters undergoing processes of transition, coming out and claiming their identities. 1928 marks a watershed moment in fictions exploring trans\* experience, with the publication of Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando*. 2018 is a more pragmatic end point, being the first year of my doctoral enrolment. By the end of that first year of intensive reading and research I needed to have consolidated the corpus of texts around which my discussion revolves.

When I started this thesis journey, it began as a search for different understandings of what it means to have a queer gender identity. I wanted to see how many ways it is possible to experience gender outside the binary of male and female. I wanted to see experimental and

celebratory representations of trans\* identities. In 2017, I began to search my local libraries and bookstores for fictional narratives about transgender and queer gender identity. I was surprised with how many books were available on the subject. I had two main criteria for my selection of primary texts. First, I chose books that I could easily attain through either my local libraries or bookstores. This decision was based on the logic that they would reflect what is available and accessible in the contemporary book market, particularly for a reader and researcher based in Aotearoa New Zealand. Second, I narrowed down my selection based on my discovery of blogs, articles and reviews relating to these texts. An engagement with these texts in popular culture justified my choices because it demonstrates they are being read and engaged with. As Joke Hermes argues, “[p]opular cultural texts help us to know who we are, and include us in communities of like-minded viewers and readers” (1-2). Hermes contends that popular culture has both the potential to act as a “cohesive social source,” reflecting “cultural citizenship” and to operate as “a domain of resistance against dominant power relations” (1-2). With its particular interest in modes of resistance, this thesis seeks to understand how and why popular culture texts perform or fail to perform these functions.

The texts that have been selected for critique in this thesis are analysed based on how they represent queer gender and make use of narrative, literary convention and literary technique. These interrogations of language are situated within a wider philosophical debate that consists of an intersection between linguistics, gender theory, transgender theory, transgender history, queer theory and feminism. The content of this thesis is presented in three parts, reflecting a reverse chronology in terms of the publication of the primary texts. Each part will reflect back and build on the next one through comparative analysis and integration of critical theory, examining different forms of fiction to offer understandings of the ways in which Western fictional texts representing queer gender can reinforce and perpetuate dominant ideologies concerning gender or deconstruct and subvert them.

Part One examines contemporary popular fiction texts published from 2000 onwards. In the twenty-first century, trans\* characters have been appearing much more widely and overtly in fictional representations. The 2010s has seen an increasing emergence of trans\* characters and, now, at the onset of the 2020s, the voices of trans\* authors, in particular, are making themselves better heard. The publications I consumed at the onset of this project reflect a widespread sociocultural interest in and engagement with the queer. Part One is primarily preoccupied with the genres of young adult fiction and social problem novels. The young adult fiction narratives include *Luna* (2004) by Julie Anne Peters, *Parrotfish* (2007) by Ellen Wittlinger, *Symptoms of Being Human* (2016) by Jeff Garvin and *If I Was Your Girl* (2016) by Meredith Russo. The other fictional texts engaged with in Part One are invested in emotion and ethical seriousness and tend to engage with women, the middleclass and the domestic. These social problem novels include David Ebershoff's historical romance *The Danish Girl* (2000), Charity Norman's *The Secret Life of Luke Livingstone* (2015) and Laurie Frankel's *This Is How It Always Is* (2017). My analyses will also draw on Niels Hoyer's edited compilation of Lili Elbe's semi-autobiographical memoir *Man into Woman* (1953). Given the terms available today to describe queer gender identities alongside the developments made in terms of social, cultural and political thought about gender, I assumed that contemporary representations would provide insight to the complexity of queer gender identities. As popular culture texts that engage with significant social issues, I hoped these books would challenge my thinking and dismantle unhelpful social stigmas and stereotypes surrounding queer gender. Yet, these texts perform a very different ideological function from what I hoped to find. Interrogating how and why these texts fail therefore became a central part of my thesis.

The texts selected for analysis in Part One are chosen because of the ways in which they fail to disrupt hegemonic gender ideologies. These are safe, white, middleclass

representations—predominantly written by cis-gender authors—that reinforce stereotypes, conform to notions of binary, congruent gender and follow common literary genre conventions to relay the same kinds of messages about how difficult it is to be trans\* and how sympathetic people must be to those with queer gender identities. Out of an impetus to offer sympathetic representations of trans\* genders, contemporary popular genre fictions tend to situate their characters within limited perimeters in terms of both content and form. These novels express an agenda related to trans\* acceptance, all saying much the same things in much the same ways. They shut down complexity, close off questions and present tidy narrative resolutions for the issues raised. As a cumulative force, these texts reveal a set of problematic tropes, conventions and modes of representation that pathologise experiences of queer gender, establishing difference as something that must inevitably conform or otherwise be punished for not doing so. The time, place and identity of those who author fictional books, as well as the times and places of the texts themselves, impacts on the outcome of what is written. Having begun the thesis with contemporary texts embedded in twenty-first century values such as social acceptance and inclusion of diversity, I found my search for complexity leading further back into the twentieth century, to the eras of Second Wave feminism and Modernism.

Part Two highlights a similar pattern of failure at work in Armistead Maupin's nine-novel domestic fiction series *Tales of the City* (1978-2014). The texts selected for Part Two are examples of fiction that attempt to disrupt convention and achieve this to a small degree but also reinforce the gendered status quo. Although this series resists some of the tropes that perpetuate problematic stereotypes about queer gender, it also fails at a representational level to destabilise hegemonic gender by conforming to some of the problematic tropes and conventions identified in Part One. Spanning a publication period of 36 years, Maupin's series offers queer potential in terms of its role as serial fiction and social satire. Given that

the development of the series' central character, Anna Madrigal, is presented over the course of many decades, I expected to find some important insights to the processes of gender and identity as they evolve over a lifetime. In many ways, this series proved less problematic than the texts encountered in Part One. Yet, the series has its limitations. Analysis of this series reveals a tension between attempts to satirise and subvert and an urgency to offer representations that can be easily approached and understood by cisgender and heterosexual readers.

Part Three steps away from popular genre fiction and into the realm of twentieth-century literary fiction. The twentieth century saw a significant emergence of fictions, biographies and autobiographies exploring queer gender, expression and identity. Presented with so many choices, I deliberately selected literary texts with messy, complex and alternative accounts of gender that engage with concepts of identity and the self as a fluid, ongoing process with limitless possibilities for multiplicity. Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve* (1977) and Virginia Woolf's 1928 novel, *Orlando: A Biography*, are texts that consciously engage with sociocultural understandings of gender, drawing attention to its construction and performance and challenging conventional understandings of the self as fixed, singular and congruent. These texts—particularly *Orlando*—dismantle binaries, disrupt literary convention, subvert gender stereotypes and stigmas, and deconstruct patriarchal order. Carter's and Woolf's works demonstrate the potential that comes with embracing the complex ways in which it is possible to experience gender and identity.

These texts are chosen by way of contrast with the texts of failure examined in Part One and the texts of partial failure explored in Part Two of the thesis. Woolf's and Carter's works are prime examples of texts that destabilise conventional understandings of gender and disrupt literary tradition and expectations. Through interrogations of how different texts subvert, attempt to destabilise, or conform to conventional social expectations of gender, this

thesis highlights a story of increasing conservatism over time and in relation to their construction. Woolf's high Modernism and Carter's postmodernism, through their inherent impetus to disrupt, dismantle and reconfigure notions of both literary tradition and gender, highlight the ways in which popular genre fiction narratives fail to question and upset gender.

Given the significant quantity of texts about queer gender and the numerous forms that these texts adopt, the scope of this thesis cannot encompass every single text that includes one or more transgender, nonbinary, genderqueer, genderfluid, agender or gender nonconforming character(s). I therefore take the liberty here of pointing to some significant contemporary texts that exist in the field, which operate differently to the texts of failure chosen for the purposes of this thesis. First, however, it is important to outline the field of scholarship available on representations of queer gender.

Engagement by scholars writing on fictional trans\* representations has witnessed significant growth over the last few decades. With the increasing visibility and production of texts on queer gender, interest in trans\* genders is widespread, encompassing fictional texts, biographies, autobiographies and critical scholarship, to name a small selection of the textual mediums that interact with queer gender identities. Transgender and queer gender studies are by no means new but are fields that are both growing and of the moment. Textual engagements with issues of gender emerge as both a product of and a commentary on their culture and society. This thesis is primarily interested in fictional representations of identities in transition and contributes to a small but growing body of scholarship that analyses the role of trans\* genders in fiction.

Studies in the field of trans\* and queer gender representation in fiction are varied and cover a wide range of subject areas. A significant body of scholarship exists on autobiographical narratives by transgender and gender nonconforming individuals. Since the

focus of this thesis is primarily on fictional representations, it will spend minimal time encountering memoir and autobiography. One semi-autobiographical text, Niels Hoyer's *Man into Woman*, is included by way of contrast with its historical romance fiction counterpart, David Ebershoff's *The Danish Girl*. Here, I outline one important article on trans\* self-representation, which has relevance to this project, before noting other important scholarship in the field of fictional representation.

Kate Drabinski analyses "the productive possibilities of self-narrative" (305) by transgender writers in her article "Incarnate Possibilities: Female to Male Transgender Narratives and the Making of Self." Although her article focuses primarily on autobiography, a genre which this thesis only engages with tangentially, her focus on female-to-male transgender narratives offers a balance which counters the dominance of male-to-female narratives. Her arguments about the formation of transgender subjectivities through self-narrative show how new ways of talking about the self can produce new ways of being. These ideas of finding new ways to articulate identity and produce new forms of the self are central to this thesis, which is interested in how representations of trans\* identities in fiction can either expose the construction of gender by upsetting its norms or reinforce hegemonic notions of gender as a fixed, congruent, binary phenomenon.

Nicole Seymour's 2013 novel, *Strange Natures: Futurity, Empathy, and the Queer Ecological Imagination*, investigates the ways in which contemporary queer fictions offer insight on environmental issues through their performance of a specifically queer understanding of nature, environmental degradation and the nonhuman. Seymour's analyses of texts such as Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues* (1993), Todd Haynes's *Safe* (1995) and Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) illustrate how homophobia, classism, racism, sexism and xenophobia inform dominant views of the environment and help to justify its exploitation. Her chapter "Post-Transsexual Pastoral: Environmental Ethics in the

Contemporary Transgender Novel” offers insight to the development of an ““organic transgenderism”” (36) in Feinberg’s *Stone Butch Blues*, Shani Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996) and Michelle Cliff’s *No Telephone to Heaven* (1987). Seymour argues that, in these texts, gender transitioning is situated as “a phenomenon that is at least partly natural—that is, innate and spontaneous—rather than primarily cultural, or constructed” (36). This synthesis of the cultural and the natural, of urban and rural, Seymour argues, leads to a dissolution of related binaries such as female-male, rational-fantastical and self-other (36).

Scholarly work in the field also demonstrates interest in the intersections of minority groups in relation to gender. Margaret Homans’s article on Jackie Kay’s 1998 novel *Trumpet* addresses the harmful effects of race and gender essentialism on adoptees, positioning the problems of transracial and transnational adoption in relation to queer, transgender and diasporic thought. Kay’s novel is centred on a character, the biracial adopted son of a transman who must negotiate his familial and racial origins as well as his own gender and that of his father’s. Homans’s analysis of the novel reveals how “anti-essentialist understandings of race and gender can relieve the harms of transracial and transnational adoption and what adoption stories can contribute to advancing intersectional gender and race theory” (123).

In addition to this scholarly interest in relatively contemporary texts, twentieth-century literary fiction is the focal point in Rachel Carroll’s 2018 book *Transgender and the Literary Imagination*. This offers an extensive consideration of critical and cultural frameworks for rereading representations of the transgender. Carroll interrogates the extent to which these fictions have reflected, shaped or transformed changing understandings of gender, examining questions of historical representation, the influence of genres on transgender life writing, the legacies of Second Wave feminist critiques of transsexuals, the impact of transition narratives on the interpretation of transgender lives, the relationship

between transsexual narratives and intersex bodies, and the role of colonial contexts and discourses of race in the construction of gender normativity.

Of even more direct relevance to this thesis, Loretta Stec's article "'In Process of Fabrication': Queer Time and Trans\* Selves in *Orlando* and *Transparent*" offers important readings of Woolf's *Orlando* as a fantastical, experimental novel that challenges "conventional structures of narrative, time and selfhood while playfully indicating that categories of sex, gender and desire are much less defining and rigid than is often believed" (181). Stec draws on the work of Kate Haffey, in *Literary Modernism, Queer Temporality*, situating *Orlando* as a foundational text in terms of its "unconventional use of time" (Haffey 2).

Scholarly work on representations of transgender and gender nonconforming characters in fiction demonstrates a predominant focus on young adult (YA) narratives. For the most part, scholars agree that a significant quantity of YA texts in the market situate their trans\* characters in ways that restrict understandings of queer gender and reinforce problematic stigmas and stereotypes.

In their article, "Transphobic Tropes and Young Adult Fiction," Pini et al. discuss how representations of trans\* characters in young adult fiction "can contribute to a trans pedagogy that challenges dominant discourses of gender and sexuality" but "may also be oppressive for trans young people, and used as a pedagogic tool to reify hegemonic categories of sexuality and gender" (57). Pini et al.'s article offers close reading of Brian Katcher's 2009 novel *Almost Perfect*, critiquing tropes identified by Julia Serano such as the trans character as deceptive and pathetic in relation to the white cisgender male protagonist (Serano 36). Their work offers an important contribution to understandings of the ways in which fictional representations can pathologise trans\* experience and reinforce normativity.

This thesis draws on the tropes identified in Pini et al.'s article, offering critical engagement with a broader range of texts of failure to interrogate the pattern of transphobic tropes adopted in narratives of transition.

Jennifer Putzi's article, "'None of this 'trapped-in-a-man's-body' bullshit': Transgender Girls and Wrong-Body Discourse in Young Adult Fiction," offers critical engagement with a wider selection of young adult fictions, arguing that "[r]ealistic novels about transgender teenagers, usually framed as 'coming of age' narratives, privilege gender reassignment surgery as the culmination of a process of self-discovery confirming the gender binary" (423). Putzi's article focuses on use of wrong-body discourse as a convenient narrative device where the transgender character's transition and coming of age follows a single-minded trajectory to adulthood and erases their transgender past (423). Drawing predominantly on the Rachel Gold's *Just Girls* and Kristin Elizabeth Clark's *Freakboy*, Putzi demonstrates both the persistence and disruption of wrong-body discourse in YA fiction narratives. Her critique of a wide variety of other texts in this field, including Ellen Wittlinger's *Parrotfish*, Julie Anne Peters' *Luna*, Brian Katcher's *Almost Perfect*, Cris Beam's *I Am Jay*, Rachel Gold's *Being Emily* and Meredith Russo's *If I Was Your Girl*, highlights the dominant narrative of transgender embodiment, revealing that this reliance on wrong-body discourse denies readers "the space in which to think about the complexity of gender, space in which many of them might see themselves" (445).

In addition to the debates emerging about the role of YA fiction with trans\* characters, scholarly interest has also increased regarding the use of such texts within educational settings. Ashley Boyd and Taylor Bereiter's article "Pluralizing Transgender Narratives with Young Adult Literature" offers a pedagogical tool for introducing gender diversity to the literary classroom. Their article emphasises the importance of choosing texts that move away from gender stereotyping, avoid transphobic tropes and embrace community.

The teaching model they provide recommends “reading several narratives to exemplify the range in trans experiences” (17) but also identifies limitations in the texts available. They argue that “[m]ore books are also needed in which transgender characters identify as such but do not uphold the gender binary” and highlight the need for “texts in which being transgender is not the sole focus of the book, but in which a person is transgender, yet the plot revolves around other events” (18). Their article repeats a message commonly conveyed in scholarship about fictional representations of trans\* characters – that, although the field is bursting with narratives by different voices, many of these texts reinforce hegemonic values concerning binary, congruent gender.

What requires more attention in much scholarship surrounding queer gender representations in fiction is an engagement with the question of why and how these narratives fail to unsettle conventional understandings of gender and narrative in relation to the question of how they could *disturb* hegemonic tradition. This thesis builds on existing scholarship surrounding YA fictions, extrapolating on the question of what it is about these narratives that fails to unsettle the status quo. Asking the questions of “what fails” and “why” and “how,” this thesis provides close analysis of these texts of failure, identifying and critiquing the ways in which representations of queer gender fail to push understandings of trans\* beyond that which is binary, congruent and conformative. Beyond the field of YA fiction, this thesis also offers critical engagement with other forms of popular genre fiction that perform similar ideological functions. Analysis of middlebrow fictions targeted at adults confirms the patterns of pathologisation that occur in YA stories, situating issues of representation within a wider framework of contemporary popular genre fiction. The significant contribution that this thesis makes to this existing field is the dialogue it establishes by contrasting and comparing these problematic contemporary popular genre fiction narratives with different forms of narrative: Maupin’s nine-novel series *Tales of the*

*City*, which attempts to resist but sometimes conforms to negative tropes and conventions, and two examples of literary fiction from Angela Carter and Virginia Woolf, which are experimental, subversive and deconstructive. Together, these narratives produce a pattern of increasing conservatism over time, with the more contemporary, genre-restricted texts occupying positions of safety and conformity.

Not all contemporary transition narratives and representations of queer gender conform to hegemonic standards of the twenty-first century popular genre fiction novels analysed in this thesis. The texts included are chosen specifically because of their failure to subvert and unsettle. As examples of safe, white texts, these narratives provide insight to what needs to be avoided in representations of queer gender. Outside of the texts included in this thesis, the majority of which fail to unsettle conventional understandings of gender, there is an increasing quantity of texts that future scholars may turn to and investigate. Most of these have been published since 2018, the cut-off date for the texts considered in this thesis. I will also relish the opportunity to delve into these story worlds in my own future research.

A significant body of fictional texts by transgender, nonbinary and gender nonconforming authors is making itself known in the contemporary book market. As a nonbinary African writer, Akwaeke Emezi holds the potential to disrupt the patterns emerging in contemporary Western fiction. A single reading of their novel *The Death of Vivek Oji* (2020) reveals that, while this text offers more complexity, answers fewer questions and defies some expectations, it also predominantly conforms to the pathologising, transphobic tropes critiqued in this thesis. Although queer sexuality is not a topic shied away from in this novel, it is a text that relies on themes of death, violence, mental health and repression to convey a message about the dangers of being queer. Since Vivek is “slim and some suspicion of delicacy clung to me,” this gender deviance makes him/her a target for abuse (Emezi 113). The dangerous and chaotic Nigerian setting takes these themes of death

and violence to an even more extreme degree: “[s]ome people can’t see softness without wanting to hurt it” (113). Vivek’s death is initially set up as a dark reflection on the dangers and consequences of non-conformative gender performance. Having said that, the conclusion of the novel subverts the expectations built up surrounding Vivek’s death, positioning it as an accident rather than a hate crime. This twist in the narrative affords space for the reader to rethink their expectations. Overall, the narrative offers a commentary on the impetus of patriarchal socioculture to regulate difference and enforce a sense of ‘normality’ and ‘sameness.’ Vivek is accused of being possessed by demons, is told that what they are going through is a phase and is encouraged to conceal their femininity in order to remain safe.

Named one of the Best Books of the Year by more than twenty publications, including *The New York Times Book Review*, *Time*, *Vogue* and *Vulture*, Torrey Peters’s 2021 novel *Detransition, Baby* made history when it became the first book written by a trans woman to appear on the longlist for the Women’s Prize for Fiction. Set in Brooklyn, the novel centres around Reese and Ames (formerly Amy) and explores the dark and light sides of being a trans woman in the twenty-first century. Reese, a trans woman in her mid-thirties, desperately longs to be a mother. Ames, who is now living as a man, had lived for six years as a trans woman named Amy, spending much of that time in a lesbian relationship with Reese. When Ames impregnates his boss Katrina, the two do not feel equipped to be parents and Ames reaches out to Reese, asking her if she wants to be a third parent to this soon-to-be-baby. *Detransition, Baby* is a provocative story about the messy, emotional aspects of womanhood. It shifts from the past to the present, exploring the complicated lives and journeys taken by trans women and navigating taboos surrounding gender, sex and relationships. It confronts difficult topics like suicide, assault, and detransitioning but is also a funny, biting witty novel full of wisdom and original perspectives about trans lives.

Alison Rumfitt is a transgender writer based in Brighton, UK. Her 2021 debut novel, *Tell Me I'm Worthless*, is an unflinching, punk trans novel about the UK's treatment of trans people. Unpleasant, twisted and nightmarish, this novel follows two former friends: Alice and Ila. Alice is a trans woman who is haunted by a ghost. Ila is a vocal trans-exclusionary radical feminist who was radicalised after the two spent a night at a haunted house together. Each of them believes the other sexually assaulted her in that house. Rumfitt's novel is a daring, revolutionary piece of modern gothic horror that openly engages with pain, trauma and self-destruction, attacking fascism in transphobic Britain. This disruptive, discomfiting and angry transgender novel confronts both supernatural and real-world horrors.

Iconic British trans woman, and author of the celebrated *Trans: A Memoir*, Juliet Jacques offers an ambitious collection of 11 short stories. *Variations* (2021) is closely inspired by real-life accounts by British transgender men and women from the past two hundred years. Intensely researched, each story is an adaptation of a letter, article, script, interview, or account of some sort, written by or about a real trans\* person from the UK. Taking various forms, these stories are all unique, set in different decades, facing different issues, featuring different trans people living wildly different lives. *Variations* shows the breadth and scope of trans\* life, celebrating its existence and highlighting its struggles. It attacks and embraces questions of selfhood, society, freedom and gender identity.

## Theory and Definitions

This research project grapples with and makes use of an array of contested terms across various fields, maintaining a particular focus on literary studies, queer theory, gender studies, feminism and transgender theory. Many of these terms interrelate and overlap. Following the

example of Leslie Feinberg who, in *Transgender Warriors*, states that “the language I’m using in this book is not aimed at *defining* but at *defending* the diverse communities that are coalescing” (ix), I use the language pertaining to queer identities in order to both deconstruct language as a tool for oppression and to draw attention to the limitations that language imposes on people whose identities and expressions do not fit into a firm ‘this or that’ category. The work of Leslie Feinberg, especially in *Transgender Warriors*, has significantly influenced my thinking about gender and identity. It is “a challenge to the currently accepted Western dominant view that woman and man are all that exist, and that there is only one way to be a woman or a man” (xii). Her intersectional approach to transgender identity, history and politics is particularly important as it reveals the complexity with which gender must be considered.

My study will be alert to the discursive representations of queer gender in fiction and will rely on interdisciplinary, intersectional and intertextual approaches in order to formulate arguments and connections. Before establishing a context for understanding the necessary terms in transgender, gender and queer studies, it is essential to provide some background on language, particularly the terminology relating to structuralism, which is a literary concept adopted by theorists such as Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick that appears in arguments throughout this thesis. Ferdinand de Saussure’s theories not only highlight how language can be understood according to relationships between symbols and meaning but also provide a foundation upon which to understand the constraints of language and how phenomena such as pronouns and ‘political correctness’ impact on literary representations of queer gender.

## Language as a System of Constraint: Pronouns and Political Correctness

Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistic theories provide a crucial foundation for understanding how language operates as a system of gendered constraint, especially concerning the limitations of pronouns in English. Structuralism and its science of signs is a system comprising two interdependent elements: the signifier and the signified. A signifier can be a word, image or symbol that represents the idea of a 'real' thing. The signified is that which a word, image or symbol represents. The relational nature of structuralism reveals that components of language only have meaning by virtue of how they correspond with other elements in the system. In this way, "the value of just any term is accordingly determined by its environment" (Saussure 116). It is not enough to look at any given word on its own but to examine its function alongside others and within context. It is important to consider the way in which meanings associated with certain terms differ according to the time, the social and cultural spaces in which they are used and the individuals who speak, write, read and hear these words. The signifiers 'man' and 'woman,' for instance, come loaded with various connotations that differ from context to context. Interpreting what it means to have a specific gender identity thus proves challenging because no two experiences of gender are the same. When one understands that no single person's idea of 'woman' will be just like another's, this unlocks potential to consider more closely the gender diversity apparent in the world. In recognising this diversity, it thus becomes possible to challenge existing language structures that reinforce singular, binary and congruent notions of gender. It is therefore essential to consider how pronouns, which can signify gender, are, in fact, one of the strictest structures in the English language.

In his book, *Transgender Warriors*, Leslie Feinberg presents a transcription of a conversation with the Two-Spirit American-Indian Chrystos, a friend of Feinberg's who interviewed on the subject of indigenous understandings of gender. Chrystos comments on the

limitations of the English language, especially in terms of its inability to account for nonbinary identities. Chrystos argues that “the English language is rigid, and the thought patterns that form it are rigid, so that gender also becomes rigid” (26-7). Chrystos’s argument that the rigidity of thought patterns in English leads to rigid understandings of gender is reminiscent of George Orwell’s dystopian novel *1984*, which offers an extreme representation of linguistic imperialism in the context of political power and mass surveillance. In Orwell’s novel, the Thought Police actively persecute individuality and independent thinking, enforcing the use of Newspeak, a controlled language consisting of simplified grammar and restricted vocabulary, which is intended to limit free will, freedom of thought, personal identity and self-expression. If language can be constrained to such an extent, it therefore stands that potential exists in the other direction to open and ease language. Yet, many restrictions exist in modern language that limit such potential, the most rigid of which are pronouns.

If one refers to the *Oxford A – Z of Grammar and Punctuation*, or a similar text, it will provide tables, explanations and examples of how to use standard English pronouns in their various forms: personal pronoun, object pronoun, possessive pronoun, possessive determiner and reflexive pronoun. However, these reference guides do not offer a pronominal position for gender-diverse pronouns. Pronouns are used to refer to antecedents which have already been mentioned in the text. They are an essential part of discourse, improving efficiency of expression while reducing the need for repetition. Pronouns play an important role in fiction because they define perspective and point of view. The most utilised pronouns in fiction are first and third person pronouns. For many authors of trans\* fiction, using first person pronouns is an efficient way of avoiding the complex dilemma of which third person pronouns best reflect a character’s gender. For many characters, this is not an issue because the text follows a clear transition from ‘he’ to ‘she’ or ‘she’ to ‘he.’ However, for characters

who defy the gender binary or spend time between or outside the spaces of male and female, the question of appropriate pronouns becomes a challenge. The limited options for third person pronouns that one might find in most reference books on grammar and usage fail to include alternative means of referring to people with queer gender identities. Indeed, one example asserts that the role of third person pronouns is to refer to those whose identities are clear (Deutscher 347). What about people whose identities are unclear? As Leslie Feinberg puts it, “there are no pronouns in the English language as complex as I am” (*Warriors* ix).

The English language includes the feminine third person singular pronouns ‘she,’ ‘her,’ ‘hers,’ ‘herself’ and the masculine third person singular pronouns ‘he,’ ‘him,’ ‘his,’ ‘himself.’ It also has neutral third person singular pronouns: ‘it,’ ‘its,’ ‘itself’ and ‘one,’ ‘one’s,’ ‘oneself.’ However, these options are not viable since calling a person an ‘it’ is disrespectful and dehumanising; furthermore, using the term ‘one’ is more common when referring to the speaker in the first person or to someone in a general sense and is most often used in academic writing. Consequently, the third person singular pronouns ‘she’ and ‘he’ have been adapted in derogatory ways throughout history to refer to people whose genders do not conform with the hegemonic view of a binary system of gender. Feinberg explains that

[t]he hyphenated pronouns illuminated a limitation of pronouns in the English language. “She” and “he” are customarily used to describe *both* the birth sex *and* the gender expression of an individual. But “he-she” and “she-male” describe the person’s gender expression with the first pronoun and the birth sex with the second.

The hyphenation signals a crisis of language and an apparent social contradiction, since sex and gender expression are “supposed” to match. (*Warriors* 97)

The terms ‘he-shes’ and ‘she-males’ are derogatory because they rely on an existing script of conformity and congruence that many people with queer genders seek to move away from.

These derogatory terms emerge from a place of prejudice and reveal a societal impetus to regulate gender non-conformity. The crisis of language that Feinberg identifies emphasises the urgent need for a more inclusive variety of pronouns.

From the neutral third person plural pronouns ‘they,’ ‘them,’ ‘their,’ ‘theirs’ and ‘themselves,’ the English language has attained the gender non-specific use of ‘they’ as a singular pronoun. The singular ‘they’ has gained popularity both in general use—to refer to someone whose gender is unspecified—and in LGBTQIA+ culture to refer to someone who identifies as nonbinary, genderfluid, genderneutral or genderqueer. According to *Fowler’s Dictionary of Modern English Usage*, the use of ‘they’ as a singular third person pronoun can be dated back to at least the fourteenth century (Butterfield) and can be seen in the works of Shakespeare, among others. Yet, the singular use of ‘they’ has faced some scepticism regarding both its vagueness and the issues it poses in terms of grammar. For instance, should the verb that follows the subject pronoun align with its standard conjugation in the third person singular form or should the verb be conjugated in the plural form? On the one hand, if one says, “they is going to the supermarket,” it sounds clumsy and incorrect. On the other hand, if one says, “they *are* going to the supermarket,” the interlocutor might experience some confusion about whether the speaker is referring to a single person or a group of people. The successful use of ‘they’ as a third person singular pronoun therefore relies on a clear relationship to the antecedent, as all pronouns do to convey clarity and meaning. In writing this thesis, I am expected to conform to the rules that govern academic writing in English, which means that the use of the third person singular pronoun ‘they’ might be considered inappropriate. Those with identities that do not conform to the female-male binary experience similar constraints imposed by language.

This thesis respectfully refers to trans\* scholars, writers, critics and people using their chosen pronouns. Where the pronouns of characters from fiction are not specified, I take the

liberty to choose suitable pronouns. Predominantly, these pronouns conform to the female/male binary because the characters they refer to also express identities that conform to dichotomous gender. However, some instances invite plurality. Where appropriate, I use non-binary pronouns to demonstrate that rules can be broken and that even the most rigid word class in the English language, *can* continue to adapt. The most significant liberty I take with pronouns is the use of ‘zie,’ ‘zem,’ ‘zir,’ ‘zirs’ and ‘zemsself’ to refer to the central character in Angela Carter’s *The Passion of New Eve*. Since the third person pronouns ‘they,’ ‘them’ and ‘their’ can be used to refer not only to people but also to most nouns, I use the singular form (conjugated in the plural) of ‘they’ sparingly where plurality needs to be emphasised and the pronoun does not cause ambiguity regarding the antecedent.

It is important to note here that the use of ‘they’ as a third person singular pronoun, through its inherent connection to plurality (the verb that follows is conjugated in the plural form – they *are*), carries a sense of multiplicity. The person who identifies with they/them pronouns might use these to convey the idea that their gender is more than just a static, singular identity. ‘They’ can imply fluidity and multiplicity. Furthermore, this plurality can also be interpreted as signalling a connection with the idea of communalism – that the queer individual is not just an individual but also a part of a collective culture, whether that be the kinds of historic matrilineal societies that accepted and celebrated queer identities or the queer communities that exist today. Yet, this plurality does not necessarily align with every person who is queer. It is therefore important to consider alternative pronouns.

The attempt to introduce genderneutral singular pronouns to English is by no means recent; however, the fact that many of these early proposed pronouns have not found a permanent place in contemporary vernacular points to both the rigid refusal of the pronoun class to take on new terms and a societal resistance, or even obliviousness, to these terms. According to Dennis Baron’s *Grammar and Gender*, in 1789, William H. Marshall recorded

the existence of the dialectical English epicene pronoun ‘ou,’ which operates in the third person singular. Marshall traces the evolution of this pronoun into Middle English, where the writer John of Trevisa uses the versatile pronoun ‘a’ in the third person singular, third person plural and first person singular. Since then, the pronouns ‘co,’ ‘e,’ ‘E,’ ‘er,’ ‘ey,’ ‘hu,’ ‘sie,’ ‘ve,’ ‘xe,’ ‘yo,’ ‘ze’ and ‘zhe,’ among others, have emerged from different times and places or have been coined by different people. Of particular significance are the pronouns proposed and/or embraced by the trans\* people who have shaped academic understandings of gender diversity.

The American transgender author Kate Bornstein uses the pronouns ‘ze’ and ‘hir’ in her/their 1996 book *Nearly Roadkill: An Infobahn Erotic Adventure*. The American activist and author Leslie Feinberg, who identified as an “anti-racist white, working-class, secular Jewish, transgender, lesbian, female, revolutionary communist” (“Self”), “preferred the pronouns she/zie and her/hir for herself, but also said: ‘I care which pronoun is used, but people have been respectful to me with the wrong pronoun and disrespectful with the right one’” (“Self”). The writer and University of Columbia professor Jack Halberstam, also known as Judith Halberstam, goes by the pronouns ‘he/his’ but argues that he is “loosey goosey” and a “free floater” when it comes to his gender (Halberstam, “On Pronouns,” par. 1). He also notes that, while many people refer to him as ‘he,’ others also refer to him as ‘she;’ however, he argues that “the back and forth between he and she sort of captures the form that my gender takes nowadays . . . my floating gender pronouns capture well the refusal to resolve my gender ambiguity” (Halberstam, “On Pronouns,” par. 2).

Given the above arguments, it is important to think about the language one uses to describe people with queer gender identities. Refer to Appendix 1 for a full table of gender-inclusive, third person singular pronouns that can work naturally in a sentence in all five of the different forms that pronouns take. Having discussed pronouns, it is now important to

focus on how language can be used in other ways to liberate or oppress people with nonconforming gender identities.

Political correctness is a contentious issue that often appears in critical work to do with trans\* representation, politics and language. Political correctness is used to describe language, policies and measures that are intended to avoid offense or disadvantage to individuals and groups in society. The phrase first appeared in 1930 and was used to describe dogmatic adherence to ideology in authoritarian regimes such as Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia. Towards the late twentieth century in the United States, the phrase played a major role in the ‘cultural war’ between liberals and conservatives. It was used to satirise rigidity, downplay and divert attention away from discrimination, to suppress criticism and enforce favoured ideologies. Now, in the twenty-first century, the term ‘political correctness’ is most used in public discourse and the media as a pejorative with the implication that some policies are excessive or unwarranted. For further reading on shifts in usage and understandings of the term, refer to Joshua Florence’s article “A Phrase in Flux: The History of Political Correctness.” Here, the thesis focuses on the relationship between political correctness and ‘appropriate’ language.

The use of certain language can reflect an alignment with certain ideologies; for instance, the policing of language can be used with the intention of silencing minority groups. As Feinberg writes, “much of the sensitive language that was won by the liberation movements in the United States during the sixties and seventies is bearing the brunt of a right-wing backlash against being ‘politically correct’” (*Warriors* ix). Stanley Fish writes of the necessity of regulating hate speech, arguing that a difficult decision exists about whether censorship is preferable to offensiveness. He insists that the flow of discourse must either be permitted or policed; however, in preventing “speech that does obvious harm” (114-5), sacrifices in language can also restrict freedom of expression and pose a threat to creativity

and art. The safety and caution with which many contemporary authors approach the topic of transgender and queer gender identities echoes this dilemma of offensiveness and censorship. Indeed, one can think of the editing and publication process itself as a form of censorship, since books are expected to conform to the expectations that their market dictates. However, it appears that those involved in the production of books in the contemporary market are so caught up by the urge to be politically correct that many of the trans\* fictions available today are suffering under this censorship.

Perhaps, instead of asking “is this politically correct?” or “is this going to offend others?” one should ask “is this respectful of other people’s identities?” Leslie Feinberg explains that, “[w]here I come from, being ‘politically correct’ means using language that respects other peoples’ oppressions and wounds. This chosen language needs to be defended” (*Warriors* ix). Being respectful and mindful of others is far more important than arguing what is ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ or what is offensive. Taking offence is a subjective experience and not every person will respond to the same given term in the same way. Furthermore, it is not about the kind of language one uses so much as it is about *how* one uses it. Language is in a constant process of flux. Words and meanings change. The word ‘queer,’ for instance, is one that once carried derogatory connotations but has since been reclaimed by the queer community. It therefore stands that creativity should not be limited by a policing and regulation of language. Instead, it is up to the individual who wields language to use it in a way that challenges people’s thinking but remains respectful. The language used to describe people’s identities is important, as the following sections on the theory pertinent to this thesis will emphasise.

## Transgender Theory

Theorists have paid considerable attention to narratives of alternative gender identity. Books such as Susan Stryker's *Transgender History* and Leslie Feinberg's *Transgender Warriors* are important for establishing the rich history of gender diversity. Feinberg uncovers persuasive evidence that there have always been people who have crossed the cultural boundaries of gender and Stryker details American transgender history from the mid-twentieth century to today, discussing changes in thinking about gender, transgenderism, and identity politics over this time.

In *Transgender Warriors*, Leslie Feinberg argues that

[t]he word transgender has at least two colloquial meanings. It has been used as an umbrella term to include everyone who challenges the boundaries of sex and gender. It is also used to draw a distinction between those who reassign the sex they were labelled at birth, and those of us whose gender expression is considered inappropriate for our sex. (x)

It is therefore no surprise that definitions of 'transgender' can be so contentiously debated.

The term 'transgender' was first coined by the psychiatrist John Oliven in his 1965 reference work *Sexual Hygiene and Pathology*. Oliven argues that the previously-used term 'transsexual,' which was used as a synonym for 'transvestite,' is misleading since "sexuality is not a major factor in primary transvestism" (Oliven 514). The term 'transvestite' was coined in 1910 by the German sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld and "was used in much the way that 'transgender' is used now, to convey the sense of a wide range of gender-variant identities and behaviors" (Stryker, *Transgender* 17). The term 'transsexual' was introduced in 1949 by the American sexologist David Cauldwell to "draw a distinction between those 'transvestites' who sought medical interventions to change their physical bodies (that is, their

‘sex’) and those who merely wanted to change their gendered clothing (the ‘vestments’ in the root of ‘transvestite’)” (Stryker 18). The term ‘transsexual’ was popularised by the German-born American endocrinologist and sexologist Harry Benjamin in 1966, around the same time ‘transgender’ was gaining in popularity (Bevan 42). The term ‘transgender’ was born from the need to differentiate the way people think about gender identities from the practice of shaping the sexual characteristics of bodies through medical means, specifically the change of biological sex.

From the mid-seventies to the mid-eighties, ‘transgender’ began to be used as an inclusive, umbrella term. In 1992, the First International Conference on Transgender Law and Employment Policy officially defined ‘transgender’ as an expansive umbrella term that includes “transsexuals, transgenderists, and other crossdressers of both sexes, transitioning in either direction (male to female or female to male), of any sexual orientation, and of all races, creeds, religions, ages, and degrees of physical impediment” (ICTLEP). Yet, the supposed ‘inclusivity’ of transgender as an umbrella term is contradicted in the above definition by the fact it only includes ‘both sexes’ and the idea that transition can only occur between the extremes of male and female. This definition does not account for people who are intersex or people who are genderfluid, bigender, agender, pangender, nonbinary or genderqueer. The term ‘transgender’ itself does not necessarily accommodate those whose identities move away from and challenge the binaries of sex and gender. Considering that the ‘trans’ in ‘transgender’ literally means ‘to cross,’ it implies that the only shifting that can take place is either male to female or female to male. In this sense, the implied preposition ‘across’ cannot also mean ‘away from.’

‘Transgender’ is a word packed with contradiction and constrained by the rigid language system within which it is contained. Significantly, this term has been adopted into a multitude of other languages, many of which use the exact same signifier or have adapted it

to fit the designated language. While this pattern demonstrates a universalising of language that might be to the benefit of inclusivity, it can also be seen as an example of linguistic imperialism insofar as this signifier has been imposed upon societies and cultures that might already have a perfectly adequate word to encompass queer identities. Perhaps it is due to the binary rigidity of ‘transgender’ that the terms ‘trans’ and ‘trans\*’ are becoming more popular.

In writing *Transgender Warriors*, Feinberg explains that

the word *trans* is being used increasingly by the gender community as a term uniting the entire coalition. If the term had already enjoyed popular recognition, I would have titled this book *Trans Warriors*. But since the word *transgender* is still most recognizable to people all over the world, I use it in its most inclusive sense: to refer to all courageous trans warriors of every sex and gender – those who led battles and rebellions throughout history and those who today muster the courage to battle for their identities and for their very lives. (x)

It has now been over two decades since the publication of Feinberg’s book and the decision about what terms to use still requires justification; regardless of the language I choose to describe people with queer gender identities, I, like Feinberg, must emphasise that I intend for the chosen terms to be used in their most inclusive sense.

The predominantly accepted umbrella terms that will be used in this thesis include ‘transgender,’ ‘trans’ and the more recent ‘trans\*,’ which, through its inclusion of the asterisk at the end of ‘trans,’ can “refer to a variety of identities that are incredibly diverse, but share one simple, common denominator: a trans\* person is not a cisgender man or woman” (Killermann). I like this term and appreciate the simplicity and function of the asterisk, which is used in Boolean searches on computer systems to truncate a word to its root in order to receive results that include a variety of terms that might originate from the same root. The

role of the asterisk in ‘trans\*’ is to signal that the term should be understood in its most inclusive, all-encompassing sense. Yet, this word, at its root, still carries the idea of ‘crossing’ and, correspondingly, the limited view that this crossing can only happen between two extreme points. For my thesis, I therefore opt to use a combination of the terms ‘queer gender,’ ‘transgender,’ ‘trans’ and ‘trans\*,’ among others. I will use the overarching term ‘trans\*’ to refer to people who are not cis-gender men or women and I will use ‘trans’ to refer to transwomen and transmen. My use of ‘transgender’ will mostly occur within the context of transgender theory. However, over all of these options, I will rely most heavily on the phrase ‘queer gender’ to refer to the collective of groups that belong under the trans\* umbrella. The term ‘queer gender’ can encompass a multitude of nonconforming gender identities, including but not limited to transgender, nonbinary, genderqueer, genderfluid, agender and pangender.

In *Gendered Bodies*, the American professors of sociology and women’s studies Judith Lorber and Lisa Jean Moore argue that “we see ourselves and the world around us through a binary gender lens” (2). These binary limitations can be seen in the very structures of the language used to describe gender:

while our movement has introduced some new terminology, all the words used to refer to our communities still suffer from limitations. For example, terms like cross-dress, cross-gender, male-to-female, and female-to-male reinforce the idea that there are only two distinct ways to be – you’re either one or the other – and that’s just not true. (Feinberg, *Warriors* x-xi)

These unhelpful binaries reflect the ways in which language can limit the expression of people whose identities cannot simply be described as either ‘male’ or ‘female.’

The focus on identity and gender in relation to drag raises an important point about the diversity of gender expression and the role those conscious performances play in revealing the imitative structure of gender. The performative aspect of drag reveals the construction apparent in all gendered identities. Just as Jean Baudrillard insists in “The Precession of Simulacra” (1981) that the act of simulation makes the difference between the simulation and the simulated indistinguishable, Butler claims that, “[i]n imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure [of gender] itself” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 137; italics in original). The parody so integral to drag demonstrates that “the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation without an origin” (138). The parody involved in imitating gender, through its revelation of the construction and performance involved in all gender identities, demonstrates that the identification and expression of gender hold limitless potential. Since there can be no singular notion of an inherent source for gender, it can be anything one wants it to be. Gender no longer needs to be trapped within sociocultural expectations of masculinity and femininity but can blur these boundaries and express new ways of being. However, much work needs to be done to overcome the stigmas and stereotypes associated with congruent, binary gender. The term ‘transgender’ represents this potential both in the direction of moving beyond binaries and in reinforcing them.

The psychoanalyst Patricia Gherovici explains in her book, *Please Select Your Gender* (2010), that “*Transgenderism* is a contested umbrella term used to describe individuals whose gender expression and behaviour do not match the usual expectations associated with the male-female binary system” (Gherovici xiii). One example of these kinds of expectations is congruence, the idea that one’s body should match one’s identity. Lorber and Moore identify that “for transgender people, the pressure to make their bodies congruent with their chosen gender is reinforced in myriad small and constant ways” (119). This is because, “in much legislation, case law, and administrative rules that discipline the identities

of transgender people, it's still the sexed characteristics of bodies that matter. And notions of sex are still governed by logics demanding coherence. Bodies that disrupt those expectations aren't always welcome" (138). This pressure of congruence, imposed by the biologically determinist regulations that surround sex, is reflected and perpetuated by many of the fictional representations of queer gender available in the contemporary market. This thesis therefore challenges both the pathologisation of gender and the role of biological determinism in regulating queer identities.

The need to shift the focus away from the sexed body and onto identity is reflected in much transgender theory of the last few decades. The tendency to medicalise gender is an issue Gherovici covers, arguing that the term 'gender dysphoria,' assigned to those who struggle in a body that is not congruent with their gender identity, implies that there is something which inherently needs to be 'fixed.' This turns gender dysphoria into either a mental illness or a biological condition. Neither one seems to be accurate or in any way respectful to the people concerned. Mental illness implies that there is something not quite right in the brain that needs to be set back to default through therapy or conditioning or some other such method. The biological focus, by contrast, reveals a potentially alarming prioritisation of the sexed body. "With this type of medicalized transformation, the subject is reduced to a body that is seen as a malleable natural phenomenon" (Gherovici 1). Thus, the pressures to take hormones, undergo surgery, change gender status, change name and change appearance through gendered ideas of clothing, speech and actions are felt by a number who identify outside of their assigned gender. This drive tends to spawn from a prevalent anxiety among trans\* people about the 'wrongness' of their bodies. Perhaps the issue trans\* people face is not mental illness or bodily incorrectness but a society that is unwilling to accept gender expressions that deviate from expectations aligned with the sexed body. My thesis will attempt to move away from the pejorative scrutiny that can come from talking about a

trans\* person mainly in terms of their biological body and assuming a congruence with gender identity.

Wrong-body discourse is a significant and problematic trope in many representations of queer gender identities, especially contemporary ones. Judith/Jack Halberstam takes issue with the binary traps of wrong body discourse, posing the question, “what do articulations of the notion of a wrong body and the persistent belief in the possibility of a ‘right’ body register in relation to the emergence of other genders, transgenders?” (*Female Masculinity* 142). Although for many trans people, a lack of identification with the incongruently sexed body plays a significant role in their conceptions of self, it must not be forgotten that there are a plethora of queer gender identities (many of which can include transgender) that do not necessarily share the kinds of body dysmorphia and gender dysphoria experiences that are so repeatedly emphasised in fictional representations. In “Incarnate Possibilities,” Drabinski speaks of the binds that transgender writers face “as they seek to give accounts of themselves in idioms that break from the medical model” (316). Putzi likewise argues that many writers “find a frame for their own experiences in wrong-body discourse, one that allows them to make sense of their identities to themselves and to others” (428). With such a heavy focus on pathologising trans\* identity, it becomes important to ask what alternatives are possible for conceptualising queer gender.

### Transgender History: Transgender Warriors

Leslie Feinberg’s foundational book, *Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to Dennis Rodman* (1996), provides a broad, in-depth overview of queer gender identities throughout numerous cultures, societies and eras. According to Feinberg, acts of cross-dressing and gender bending can be dated back to the Palaeolithic era. *Transgender Warriors*

weaves history, theory, mythology, anthropology, politics, class, Marxism and feminism together to create a unique account of queer genders, moving from stories of ‘Two-Spirit’ native American Indians and a queer reading of Joan of Arc to the transphobic teachings of Deuteronomy and the oppressive laws of the early Catholic church. Feinberg identifies crucial milestones in transgender history, outlining the birth of the first gay liberation society as well as historical events such as the Stonewall Rebellion, a significant uprising by the queer community, which took place over the course of several days in 1969 in response to police riots at the Stonewall Inn in Lower Manhattan, New York City. Feinberg presents a plethora of accounts of cross-gendered expression in communal matrilineal societies across Ancient, Medieval and Modern times, identifying that “gender and sex diversity are global in character” (47) and revealing how trans\* people, who were once revered, have come to be reviled.

Feinberg positions trans\* people throughout history as warriors, marking their positions as spiritual leaders, medicine people, shamans, priest/esses and god/desses, detailing stories of trans\* leadership in early rural rebellions, modern urban uprisings and guerrilla warfare. Feinberg argues that the shift from matrilineal, communal societies to class-divided, patriarchal systems has led not only to the subjugation of women but also to the oppression of trans\* people, queer gender expression and queer sexual identities. “It was the overthrow of communalism and the subsequent division of society into classes that mandated the partitioning of the sexes and outlawed any blurring of those ‘man-made’ boundaries” (112). Feinberg identifies that the “earliest overthrow of mother-right took place in the fertile river valleys of Eurasia and northeast Africa during the period of about 4500 to 1200 B.C.E. In this new social structure, riven by inequality, male ruling class attitudes toward women and trans people grew more and more hostile, even toward transgendered queens and kings” (53). Feinberg further explains that both secular and religious law have been shaped over the

years by the patriarchal figures and groups who sought to strengthen patriarchal inheritance and rule. The writings of Deuteronomy, the early Catholic Church and the repressive laws of Ancient Rome have all played a role in the oppression of women, trans\* people and same-sex love. In fact, the Roman body of law known as the *Corpus Juris Civilis* was later used as the foundation for religious and secular law in Europe, England and the United States (64).

Fascinatingly, many of these laws dictate expectations surrounding appropriate vestments. Deuteronomy prohibits cross-dressing, stating that “[a] woman shall not wear a man’s garment, nor shall a man put on a woman’s cloak, for whoever does these things is an abomination to the LORD your God” (*Holy Bible*, Deut. 22.5). Gender, however, is not defined by clothing. As Judith Butler posits, “in what world, under what conditions, does not liking a particular type of clothing provide evidence for being the wrong gender?” (*Undoing Gender* 72). Yet, wearing the clothes of the ‘opposite’ sex not only maintains the capacity to represent a queer identity but also demonstrates a refusal to collaborate with the idea that the sexes are divided. Laws similar to those which regulate queer expression through clothing articulate a similar view about the role of biology. Deuteronomy, for instance, insists that “[n]o one whose testicles are crushed or whose male organ is cut off shall enter the assembly of the LORD” (*Holy Bible*, Deut. 23.1). Feinberg argues that the existence of such laws is due to the fact that “wealthy Hebrew males were trying to consolidate their patriarchal rule. That means they were very much concerned about making distinctions between women and men, and eliminating any blurring or bridging of those categories” (51).

Men in positions of authority and power all over the world have made similar attempts to maintain the hegemonic order. Feinberg writes that, in the fifteenth century, the Church put a rooster on trial at Basel for having laid an egg. This act was attributed to a sorcerer masquerading as a cock. The rooster and egg were consequently burned at the stake (71). The ridiculousness of this rooster’s trial demonstrates not only the futility of biological

determinism—since nature is full of variation—but also reflects the patriarchal impetus to stamp out any evidence of diversity, which is inherently non-conducive to a patriarchal system that requires the pitting of opposites against one another. It is amusing to know that something as small as a rooster can pose such a threat to paternal authority and power. The burning of the rooster and its egg at the stake is designed to regulate and reinforce the values of the gendered hegemonic order. It acts as a reminder to those with nonconforming identities of what will happen if they challenge the ‘natural order.’ Yet, just as there is nothing inherent about a ‘natural order,’ there is equally nothing inherent in the construction of gender.

### Gender Theory and Performativity

This thesis is informed by Judith Butler’s arguments about gender as performance and construction. *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Undoing Gender* (2004) have become key works of contemporary feminist theory, gender studies, queer theory, and the politics of sexuality in culture. Butler defines gender as “the repeated stylisation of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural source of being” (*Gender Trouble* 33). This rigid regulatory frame is the hegemonic structures in society that dictate gender as a strict male-female binary with no room for incongruence or fluctuation between and outside these two categories. It is the repeated use of “words, acts, gestures, and desire [that] produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this on the surface of the body” (*Gender Trouble* 136).

The idea that gender is something internal and inherent is reproduced in many contemporary works of fiction; queer characters often make statements like “I have felt this way as long as I can remember” in order to justify their gender identification to others. Yet, “there is neither an ‘essence’ that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to

which gender aspires” (*Gender Trouble* 140). It is performative acts that create ideas of gender (140) and, significantly, the repetition of these performances that consolidates such ideas of gender. The issue with a repeated set of acts is the expectation that these acts must remain the same. In “reenacting and reexperiencing a set of meanings already socially established” (140), these performances maintain gender within a binary frame. Thus, repetition poses the threat of trapping the individual in a static, singular sense of self. Yet, the self, as Angela Carter and Virginia Woolf demonstrate in the texts analysed in Part Three of this thesis, is mutable. The capacity for humans to change and grow is infinite. The strict regulation of gender within a singular and static frame therefore limits possibilities of identification.

Butler argues that gender is not just expressed through performance but is actively created by performance: “gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences” (*Gender Trouble* 139) and “we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right” (*Gender Trouble* 140). Judith Butler argues that “[g]ender is the mechanism by which notions of masculine and feminine are produced and naturalized, but gender might well be the apparatus by which such terms are deconstructed and denaturalised” (*Undoing Gender* 42). In this way, it is impossible to completely escape gender, especially since the rigid categories of ‘male’ and ‘female’ are ingrained within the English language. Yet, there are people who identify outside of these categories – as nonbinary, genderfluid, genderqueer, gender nonconforming, pangender or genderless. Patricia Gherovici insists that “gender as a manipulable construct glosses over a fantasy of escaping altogether the conundrum of sexual division” (2). It may not be possible to move away from the labels of ‘male’ and ‘female’ but it is always possible to introduce new labels into the mix. When used in isolation, however, these terms can be vague or even inappropriate. They raise questions about what kind of female or male a person might be and whether female and male refers to gender, sex or both.

For sexual determinists, who argue that a person's gender is defined by their sex, there is a tendency to overlook the diversity that naturally occurs from person to person. Lorber and Moore argue that, although sex and gender do not have to be mutually exclusive, there is considerable social, cultural and personal investment in being able to distinguish between or align the two. Moreover, there is the belief that male and female are the only forms of sex and therefore the only forms of gender; yet, the various forms of intersexuality apparent in humanity suggest otherwise. Sexual organs, sexual characteristics and even chromosomes are more diverse than a congruent binary would suggest (Stryker, *Transgender* 8). Gender identities are just as diverse, if not more. For the most part, gender theorists argue that sex and gender are two distinct categories which can, but do not have to, overlap. Sex relates to biology: genitalia, chromosomes and hormones. Gender, by contrast, relates to how an individual expresses themselves at a social (and often political) level. Lorber and Moore explain that the presumed congruence between sex and gender means "we assume that when we know someone's gender (their embodied behaviour and presentation), we also know their sex (their physiological and biological status)" (5). This assumption is highly problematic because, for many people, their genitalia do not define their gender. Judith Butler famously emphasises this notion, arguing that the presence or absence of a "[p]hallus does not constitute the entirety of [a person's] worth" (*Undoing Gender* 72). Yet, if one's biology does not shape one's gender, what does?

Leslie Feinberg argues that it is "a complex interaction between individuals and their societies" (*Warriors* xii) that shapes gender. Gender is different for each person who experiences it; yet, many contemporary representations of queer identity fail to reflect this diversity and limit themselves to the binary constraints of femininity and masculinity. In *Undoing Gender*, Butler emphasises the importance of the social dimension of gender, arguing that "[g]ender is not exactly what one 'is' nor is it precisely what one 'has'" (42).

Similarly, Lorber and Moore argue that “bodily, behavioural, environmental, and social structural factors” are all involved in the construction of gender (11).

Gender, much like language, is a social construction. It is through a linguistic capacity that one can assert one’s identity and formulate meaning from the signifiers one has access to. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues that “discussions of linguistic performativity have become a place to reflect on ways in which language really can be said to produce effects: effects of identity, enforcement, seduction, challenge” (*Tendencies* 11). In this thesis, I frequently take issue with language that produces effects of regulation, congruence and conformity. I argue that, despite the limitations of language, it is possible to use language in ways that *celebrate* identity, reflect queer desire, demonstrate the complexity of gender and challenge pre-existing assumptions about identity as something fixed, singular and belonging to a binary.

Yet, as Butler identifies, one cannot discuss gender identity and expression without doing so in relation to binary understandings of ‘man’ and ‘woman.’ In fact, these labels are essential because they establish boundaries, without which the acts of crossing, challenging and subverting cannot occur. As the literary theorists Joseph Bristow and Trev Lynn Broughton put it,

[b]oundaries – social, generic, cultural – at once proscribe and invite transgression, informing both where we think we are and where we think we would like to be. Hence the vital role they play in psychoanalytic accounts of subjectivity, and of the relationship between identity and desire. (15)

In this thesis, I therefore read texts that represent characters with nonconforming gender identities in terms of queer possibility, by which I mean that these texts have the opportunity to push conventional understandings of gender beyond the binary realm of male and female.

This potential always occurs with the crossing of boundaries. Hence, the focus on transition narratives leads the thematic selection of texts in this thesis.

Textual examples that use language to deconstruct gender are limited but provide helpful foundations for thinking about the way we, the writers, speakers, readers and listeners of the English language, can come to new conclusions about the nature of gender and what it means to be queer. Sedgwick uses the term “explicit performance utterances” (*Touching Feeling* 4) to talk about the way language uses syntactic and semantic features which can be considered performative, asserting “that the utterance itself performs” (*Touching Feeling* 4). Therefore, if a word is a signifier that can perform, the entire system of signs that a book comprises of can be also seen as performative. The text engages in a performance that consists of multiple utterances presented in relation to one another. Through close textual analysis, I examine how these utterances operate together to create an impression of what it means to have queer gender. Furthermore, through comparative analysis, I assess how each of these texts operate in relation to one another and offer a collective contribution to discourses on queer gender identity.

### Queer Theory

Queer theory is essential in my thesis for reaching understandings of normalcy, deviance and otherness. Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle’s chapter “Queer,” from *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory* (2016), offers a helpful contextualisation of the history and theory of the term ‘queer.’ They assert that “queers are a category apart, a self-defining and identifiable group determined precisely by the queer difference of its members from the regime of the normal” (261). In terms of gender, this definition implies that all trans\* people belong to the umbrella term ‘queer’ as they deviate from “the regime of the normal” – normal

here meaning ‘cisgender’ and heterosexual. By analysing what may determine ‘normalcy’ and what might make up the ‘queer,’ I intend to argue that the label ‘queer’ does not always align with ‘trans\*’ when the practice and expression of gender come into play. In fact, when gender identities conform to social expectations, can they indeed be considered queer? Since queerness is about a refusal of the social and political, this term hardly seems appropriate for identities that accept sociocultural and political models of femininity and masculinity. In many of my literary case studies, trans\* characters do not necessarily embrace the term queer or even variations of trans\*. In Meredith Russo’s *If I Was Your Girl* (2016), for instance, Amanda moves to a new town and attempts to start afresh with nobody but her father knowing that she used to be a boy. It is possible to make a case for Amanda that, having undergone a transformative process, she is no longer trans\* or queer but a young woman with a slightly different background from other young women her age. By conforming to societal expectations of congruent, binary gender, Amanda is an example of a character that not only renders the transgender invisible but also reinforces dominant gender ideologies.

Judith/Jack Halberstam’s book *The Queer Art of Failure* identifies the concept of failure as queer insofar as it is “a way of refusing to acquiesce to dominant logics of power and discipline” (88). He argues that “[q]ueer studies offer us one method for imagining, not some fantasy of an elsewhere, but existing alternatives to hegemonic systems” (89). Since it is “the social and symbolic systems that tether queerness to loss and failure” (97), queer art becomes a mode of resistance when it embraces failure itself as queer, when it uses its failure as a mode of resistance. He argues that “[f]ailing is something that queers do and have always done exceptionally well; for queers failure can be a style . . . or a way of life” (3).

Halberstam’s notions of failure in queer art operate differently to how this thesis explores failure in popular fiction. Where Halberstam is interested in failure itself as queer and as a way of exploring alternative ways of being, this thesis positions failure in terms of the

ideological function of its primary texts. Halberstam notes the necessity of drawing on “histories within which the subject collaborates with rather than always opposes oppressive regimes of dominant ideology” (23). The stories that collaborate with dominant ideologies are positioned in this thesis as failures because of the way they conform to notions of binary, congruent gender. Halberstam writes that, “in order for a system to work, it has to keep creating and maintaining the structures or the structured relations which allow it to function” (17). In drawing on texts that fail to disturb and oppose hegemonic gender structures, and juxtaposing them with texts that disrupt and dismantle, this thesis emphasises that it is the resistance of dominant ideologies that can reveal alternative ways of knowing and being.

The work of Jay Prosser, among others, will be pivotal to this thesis. Prosser’s chapter “Judith Butler: Queer Feminism, Transgender, and the Transubstantiation of Sex” (1998) in *Second Skins* considers issues of transgenderism and ‘the queer moment’ (21) in relation to work from theorists such as Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick.

Seized on as a definitively queer force that ‘troubled’ the identity categories of gender, sex, and sexuality . . . the trope of crossing was most often impacted with if not explicitly illustrated by the transgendered subject’s crossing their several boundaries at once: both the boundaries between gender, sex, and sexuality and the boundary that structures each as a binary category. (Prosser 21-22)

The crossing of boundaries, especially simultaneous ones, represents great potential in terms of dismantling the limitations stipulated by patriarchal convention. Yet, as many popular fiction novels about transition reveal, simply crossing from one side of a dichotomy to another is not enough; these boundaries need to not only be crossed but also queered, blurred and deconstructed in order to open possibilities for alternative ways of being.

Patricia MacCormack's chapter "Queer Posthumanism" discusses the expansion of the field of queer studies to 'the human' as well as to gender, sex, and identity. She asserts that "[q]ueer theory works not to exchange binaries of masculinity/femininity, hetero/homo or even human/non-human but to theorise the spaces between and the mobilisation of categories of identity through desire" (110). "Queer literally celebrates its deviant status, a deviation from the imperative oppressive dominant, not a new nomenclaturing of how to be" (115). Considering that queer essentially means a resistance to that which might be considered normal, deviance can occur in more than one way for any individual in any given instance. It is a deviance from hegemonic structures of gender—such as the binary of male and female, expectations of congruence and conformity, and stereotypes and stigmas within these categories—that this thesis strives towards and encourages. In resisting binaries, subverting stereotypes and breaking away from sociocultural expectations, it is possible to explore multiple complex forms of diversity. In exploring difference, the queer can perhaps become something that is celebrated and opened up rather than regulated, marginalised and oppressed.

Leslie Feinberg's book *Transgender Warriors* is particularly helpful for establishing the complex intersections of gender, feminism and the queer within a wider frame that considers institutional oppression of all kinds. Feinberg writes that

[o]ur histories as trans people and women are inextricably entwined. In the past, wherever women and trans people were honoured, you can find cooperative, communal production. And societies that degrade women and trans people are already cleaved into classes, because those patriarchal divisions mandate a rigid categorization of sex and gender. (112)

In understanding that the shift from communal matrilineal societies to divisive patriarchal rule is a key factor in the oppression of all kinds of minority groups, it is possible to see not only how trans\* histories and feminine histories are interconnected but also how the liberation movements of these groups can work together to expose the wider issues at work in society.

One of the gifts of the women's liberation movement in the seventies was the understanding that our oppression as women is institutionalized – or built into the economic system. But this same system also tyrannizes entire nationalities, subjugates people because of who they love, denies people their abilities, works people near to death, and leaves many homeless and hungry. And last but not least, this system grinds up those who don't fit a narrow definition of woman and man. (110)

Narrow definitions of woman and man are something that feminism has fought hard to overcome.

The work of Second Wave feminists has revealed that it is just as unhelpful to think of 'woman' as an essential category one is born into as it is to argue that women share a common experience (109). One of the key principles born out of the Second Wave of women's liberation, particularly in the United States, is that biology is not destiny (110). As Simone de Beauvoir writes, "[o]ne is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (293). Feinberg astutely identifies that the "heart of that wisdom is that one should not be limited in life or oppressed because of birth biology. This is a truth that has meaning to all trans people and all women" (*Warriors* 110). Unfortunately, and in spite of the progress made in understanding institutional oppression, people are still targeted for not complying with expected social models of gender performance.

If hegemonic standards dictate that gender must be congruent, singular and consistent, it therefore stands that incongruence, multiplicity and inconsistency offer the potential to resist and destabilise these structures. The notion of fluidity is particularly helpful for understanding the human capacity to change and grow. Fluidity is, by no means, a new concept. It can be traced far back in history to the matrilineal societies Feinberg discusses. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* include characters who experience gender fluidity as well as fluidity of state and the philosopher Heraclitus was famous for his ideas about ever-present change and flow. Although concepts of fluidity have existed in culture for years, a dominant mode of thought pervades society, conveying the idea that a person must remain the same to be socially accepted. Of course, hegemonic structures do not want people to change because with this growth might come the realisation that dominant groups need minorities to suffer for them to thrive. With an openness to one's capacity to morph and occupy multiple states of existence it becomes possible to live a life rich in experience and full of endless potential.

These ideas of the potential of fluidity to disrupt boundaries is a leitmotif throughout this thesis. As I embark on an analysis of the fictional works at the heart of my discussion, I will be constantly juxtaposing limited and reductive ways of thinking about gender with subversive and complex understandings. 'Embracing the mess' became something of a catch phrase during my thesis journey. In Part One of the following analysis, I explore the limitations of texts that seek to be too tidy. While celebrating trans\* experience, these texts also restrict representations of trans\* identity to a neat package of recurring tropes and, thus, ultimately fail to capture the diversity and richness of gender.

## Part One: Popular Trans\* Fictions Published since 2000

Many contemporary works of popular genre fiction published since 2000 representing trans\* identities seek to depict characters who are sympathetic to the reader and combat negative associations of otherness, monstrosity, and perversity. These texts give the appearance of celebrating the diverse ways it is possible to experience queer gender but collaborate with the very stereotypes they claim to resist. Many of these texts are agenda-driven; they try to present experiences of queer gender with respect and understanding. To do so, they often need to work within fairly narrow, conventional parameters in terms of narrative and representation. Instead of challenging people's thinking, they confirm what the authors and their audience already like to believe about inclusivity and flexibility. Since writers do not want to come across as transphobic, writing about transgender and queer gender with too much sensitivity can limit the scope for creative exploration. In maintaining strict and safe perimeters for their texts, what appears in the contemporary range of popular trans\* fictions are many books that feel very similar to one another and tend to perpetuate dominant ideologies of gender as congruent, conformative and binary.

I will examine a range of novels with central characters who are either transgender, genderfluid or gender nonconforming and undergoing a process of transition. These texts fit under the umbrella of popular genre fiction but adopt conventions from different sub-genres: drama, romance, historical fiction, young adult fiction and the social problem novel. These genres all fit under the umbrella term 'middlebrow fiction,' literature that engages with social problems and issues but tends to follow prescribed formulas. Part One is primarily preoccupied with the genres of YA fiction and the social problem novel. The YA fiction narratives include *Luna* (2004) by Julie Anne Peters, *Parrotfish* (2007) by Ellen Wittlinger, *Symptoms of Being Human* (2016) by Jeff Garvin and *If I Was Your Girl* (2016) by Meredith

Russo. The social problem novels engaged with in Part One include David Ebershoff's historical fiction *The Danish Girl* (2000), Charity Norman's *The Secret Life of Luke Livingstone* (2015) and Laurie Frankel's *This Is How It Always Is* (2017). My analyses will also draw on Niels Hoyer's edited compilation of Lili Elbe's semi-autobiographical memoir *Man into Woman* (1953).

The texts analysed in this part of the thesis emerge out of an exploding culture of representation. Trans\* is a theme that authors are drawn to. This is a topic with the potential to be risky and edgy; yet, a significant portion of writing on genders in transition tends to play it safe and remain in the realm of the known. Significantly, the authors considered here are white Europeans and Americans, which reveals a specific set of limitations in terms of their positionality. These are authors who are interested in trans\* but are approaching it from a safe, white, middleclass angle. Consequently, their interpretations of trans\* are relatively similar. They tend to approach the subject as a 'social problem' and offer a set of solutions that conveniently relocate the queer to a space of congruence and conformity. These representations are of interest to this thesis because of the ways in which they fail to disrupt dominant gendered ideologies. This part of the thesis therefore functions as a mechanism to interrogate the persistence of binaries and hegemonic structures of gender. The questions of what fails in popular fiction and how and why are addressed in terms of the sameness of the narratives examined herein. This part of the thesis is not speaking for all trans\* fictions but a significant body of them. These are texts that dominate in popular culture but offer limited understandings of what it means to transition gender and experience queer gender.

Since the novels I will be examining can fall into varying categories, I will refer to them with a term of my own coining. I will apply the term 'trans\* fictions' to the novels I analyse in Part One of this thesis. This term, I hope, will encompass the one thing that these texts have in common – that they are fictions of varying kinds that feature transgender,

genderfluid and gender-nonconforming characters and their experiences of gender transition, identity and expression. I will explore the common conventions that operate within these trans\* fictions, such as tidy narratives, conformist structure, predictable narrative arcs, the solving of problems, the answering of questions and the closing down and resolving of narrative threads. Any edginess witnessed in these texts is often undermined by a conventional reestablishment of the status quo, presented in a tidy package of narrative resolution.

As a result of the conventional construction of these texts, they tend to avoid discussing issues that could problematise or unsettle the narrative—for example, sexual desire is almost entirely absent—and they rely on problematic modes of representation, such as the trans\* subject as child or the trans\* subject as two people fighting to live in the same body. Infantilisation is a problematic mode of representation for both children and adults – it is reductive and removes the right to have full autonomy and be understood or taken seriously. Having two people fighting to live in the same body gives the impression that there will be a ‘victor,’ that one of these identities will triumph over the other and prove itself to be the ‘true’ identity. The rejection of multiplicity is often echoed throughout these novels with the language of death in relation to the ‘weaker’ identity. Many of these texts maintain a strict and serious approach to representing the challenges that trans\* people face daily, often relying on the abuse and/or death of main and side characters as plot devices to progress the narrative and position the main character as sympathetic to the reader. Messages about the regulation and oppression of nonconforming identities are commonly conveyed through the inclusion of abuse, violence and harassment in popular trans\* fictions, thus demonstrating the punitive consequences that can come from daring to be different. These ideas can be thought of as warnings about the way society seeks to regulate gender practices; however, they also perpetuate negative stereotypes about what it means to be trans\* or have queer gender.

Given the thematic organisation of this thesis and the important arguments that need to be made about representational tropes of queer gender, it has been necessary to be selective with the content of the chapters. Here, I would like to address an important trope that has not been able to find a place in any of the following chapters but nonetheless plays a significant role in most of the texts I examine.

Many of the novels interrogated in this thesis are preoccupied with the idea of ‘passing,’ which is positioned as an ideal to strive for, to fit in with everyone else and be seen as ‘normal.’ The term ‘passing’ has significant associations with a history of racial oppression. First coined in Nella Larsen’s 1929 novel *Passing*, the term can be understood as the “crossing of any line that divides social groups” (Sollors 247). Most important, however, is the term’s connotations with the invisibility and eradication of ethnic groups in the United States of America. W. E. B. Du Bois expresses a concept of the double consciousness, arguing that a Black person lives “in a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world (8). Frantz Fanon writes of the “historico-racial schema . . . [provided] by the other, the white man, who had woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories” (111). In understanding the act of passing as a performance of dominant expectations that allows one to move safely in society, it becomes possible to understand how, in the act of performing another identity, concepts of the self can become lost, invisible or eradicated. Jessa Lingel, in discussing passing and bisexuality, notes that “a potential intake of negative self-valuation occurs with each act of passing” (394). With each act of passing, the self, through the performance of the other, can lose its sense of self and begin to not only accommodate but internalise the other. In this sense, passing is not an act of safety that allows a person to move freely in society without challenge but rather an act of danger insofar that it threatens to eliminate diversity, difference and that which challenges the status quo.

In *Transgender Warriors*, Feinberg reveals that the act of gender passing finds its roots in the oppressive, class-divided societies of medieval Western Europe, arguing that “the Church’s legends of the female-to-male saints introduced the concept of ‘passing’ – being forced to hide a trans identity” (70). In this sense, passing is an expectation linked with congruent, conformative understandings of binary gender. Feinberg notes that “[p]assing means having to hide your identity in fear, in order to live. Being forced to pass is a recent historical development. It is *passing* that is a product of oppression” (89). The phenomenon of passing, as a product of oppression, can therefore be understood as a response to the patriarchal regulation of any deviance that unsettles hegemonic power structures. In conforming to social standards of sameness, the act of passing strengthens patriarchal power and perpetuates the marginalisation of minority groups.

The repeated appearance of this theme in texts representing queer gender identities is problematic because it reinforces fear and oppression. These texts, through the incorporation of a character’s journey through gender as an attempt to ‘pass’ in society, reinforce the very messages of oppression that these texts claim to challenge. Perhaps without realising it, these novels render trans\* identities meaningless, emphasising concealment and caution as primary modes of survival for people with queer gender. Although it can be argued that many contemporary trans\* fictions lend visibility to the existence of trans\* people, the idea of passing threatens to render these lives *invisible*. This thesis therefore seeks answers about how and why popular trans\* fictions are failing to project understandings of queer gender beyond binary, socially accepted models of gender. It is important to remember that

[w]e have not always been forced to pass, to go underground, in order to work and live. We have a right to live openly and proudly. When we are denied those rights, we are the ones who suffer that oppression. But when our lives are suppressed, *everyone*

is denied an understanding of the rich diversity of sex and gender expression and experience that exist in human society. (Feinberg, *Warriors* 88)

If dominant discourses promote themes of safety, fear and conformity, it seems appropriate to battle these oppressive narratives with notions of pride, freedom, resistance and celebration.

This part of the thesis consists of four inter-related chapters. The first chapter will consider the importance of rebirth in relation to processes of coming of age, growing up and coming out. The second chapter will explore some of the issues with common devices for narrating and representing identity. The third chapter will interrogate the stifling of sexual desire. Finally, the fourth chapter will investigate the roles of mental health, abuse and humour (or lack thereof).

## Chapter 1: Rebirth in the Bildungsroman

In this chapter, I examine texts that follow the narrative convention of the bildungsroman. A convention can be a device, tool, principle or procedure of form that is generally accepted by both writer and reader and allows for certain restrictions and freedoms. An example of a significant convention I draw on in this thesis is the hero's journey, which is a device for maximising the plot's dramatic potential and inviting closure. The bildungsroman is a procedure of form that allows space for a character's growth within a narrative framework of 'coming of age.' A bildungsroman is a "kind of novel that follows the development of the hero or heroine from childhood or adolescence into adulthood, through a troubled quest for identity" (Baldick 39). The term 'bildungsroman' originates in Germany and was first coined in 1819 by the philologist Karl Morgenstern; the idea of the bildungsroman, however, originates from Johann Wolfgang Goethe's novel *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (1795-6), in which the eponymous central character undergoes a journey of self-realisation in relation to the society he lives in. The bildungsroman is often referred to in English as a 'coming-of-age' story. I use both terms in this chapter: I apply the term 'bildungsroman' when discussing the convention and its overall function, and I use the phrase 'coming of age' to consider the different circumstances in which central characters grow and self-discover.

In Laurie Frankel's social problem novel *This Is How It Always Is*, Poppy is a child of ten whose imminent trajectory into adolescence causes a great deal of concern for her parents. In Meredith Russo's YA fiction novel *If I Was Your Girl*, Amanda is a teenager who stands on the threshold of adulthood, waiting to claim her place there. In these texts, the central characters experience different forms of rebirth. For characters who are pre-adult, their journey is one of discovery; these characters experience literal growing up as well as a figurative coming-of-age process. Coming of age can involve embracing one's identity, receiving surgery, navigating relationships and finding or challenging one's place in the

world. It sometimes involves wellbeing, bleeding and, most importantly, a process of coming out or being outed.

I use fictional examples of childhood and adolescence and compare them, in this chapter, with adult characters who are projected back into a state of youth and innocence. Many transgender, genderfluid and gender-nonconforming characters in popular fiction must align their bodies with their gender before they are seen as arriving—or re-arriving—at adulthood. In her article, “None of this ‘Trapped-In-A-Man’s-Body’ Bullshit,” Jennifer Putzi argues that “the experience of determining one’s gender identity and receiving medical treatment is often figured by both medical discourse and transgender individuals themselves as a type of adolescence” (429). This conflation of transgender experience and a pre-adult state is similarly reflected in literary representations. On embracing their confirmed gender identity and/or embarking on a medical journey, characters are projected back into childhood, to a prepubescent, innocent self, leaving parts of their old selves as good as dead. Often, it is the case that these characters must re-earn their place in adulthood. In the social problem novels, Charity Norman’s *The Secret Life of Luke Livingstone* and David Ebershoff’s *The Danish Girl*, both Lucia and Lili must undergo a coming-of-age journey similar to that of Amanda and Poppy in order to experience rebirth.

In these texts, rebirth operates in a plethora of ways. Depending on the character, rebirth can be emotional, intellectual, sexual, psychological, spiritual, physical or social. Different forms of rebirth have different effects. For example, sexual rebirth often involves a stifling of sexuality, spiritual rebirth typically comprises a form of enlightenment about a character’s place in the world, and physical rebirth can involve surgery and/or a change of outward appearance. Transgender, genderfluid and gender-nonconforming characters in the YA fiction novels Ellen Wittlinger’s *Parrotfish*, Julie Anne Peters’s *Luna* and Jeff Garvin’s *Symptoms of Being Human* all experience a form of rebirth, often in conjunction with a

coming of age. Before characters can experience rebirth, however, they must first navigate newfound states of innocence and helplessness. The infantilisation of these characters strips them of their perceived capacity to make responsible decisions, meaning that the character cannot be seen as mature or as knowing what is best for their self. Consequently, many characters are left in a position where it is difficult for other characters (and sometimes the reader, too) to be sure that the character truly knows who they are and what they want. This mode of storytelling is problematic because it operates paradoxically with the claims of characters who insist that they have always been the same person; yet, growth and change are essential for shaping the narrative arc. It is only through this stripping back of adult rights that the central character can undergo their journey of self-discovery and self-creation, which is so essential to the bildungsroman.

### Coming of Age

David Ebershoff's 2000 novel, *The Danish Girl*, is a fictional representation of the first ever sex-change. Set in Copenhagen, Paris and Dresden throughout the 1920s and into the early 1930s, this story is an historical fiction as well as a romance and a middlebrow fiction that engages with a 'social problem.' The narrative begins with the painter Einar Wegener, who discovers an appreciation for female clothing when his wife, Greta, makes him sit for a painting in the dress of the model who cannot attend the sitting. As time progresses, and he experiments with feminine clothing, he discovers that these experiences mean more for him than just cross-dressing for laughs or to help his wife. Greta, too, understands this and suggests "[w]hy don't we call you Lili?" (13). This instance marks the 'birth' of Lili, a moment which Einar reflects on later in the novel (148). By contrast, in Niels Hoyer's edited compilation of Lili Elbe's autobiography, it is not until Lili undergoes surgery that she considers herself reborn: "she called [this] the day of her proper birth" (179). *Man into*

*Woman* is a mixture of autobiography and biography, with fictional elements. Niels Hoyer, the editor, writes the first part of the book, the biography, to set up Lili's life as Andreas (Einar) leading up to her operations. Some fictionalising of small details is involved to tie the narrative together, but the rest is based on fact. The autobiography makes up the second part of the book and consists of letters by and to Lili from various people as well as Lili's and Grete's diary entries [Lili's wife, Grete, is called "Grete" in *Man into Woman*].

Rebirth is a common convention in narratives of transition. In Charity Norman's *The Secret Life of Luke Livingstone*, Lucia's coming out at work marks her social rebirth, and her friend Judy calls this "*Lucia's birthday*" (304; italics in original). Births are an occasion for celebration. Perhaps it is with the value of celebrating new life that writers choose to employ rebirth as a narrative device. Indeed, rebirth is pivotal to popular trans\* fictions because of the space it affords the characters to develop.

Rebirth is central to many faiths and religions. In some Christian denominations, for example, it is possible to receive baptism, even late in life. This baptism is the outward sign of inner spiritual rebirth, offering the person the chance for a fresh start. In the Bible, Ephesians urges believers

to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

(*Holy Bible*, Eph. 4.22-24)

While many faiths focus on the idea of spiritual rebirth, there are some which also focus on rebirth in a more physical sense. Buddhism and Hinduism, for example, place high importance on the idea of reincarnation – as do other Eastern religions such as Jainism and Sikhism. Buddhism shares with Hinduism the doctrine of Samsara, whereby all beings pass

through an unceasing cycle of birth, death and rebirth until they find a means of liberation from the cycle. However, Buddhism differs from Hinduism in rejecting the assertion that every human being possesses a changeless soul which constitutes their ultimate identity and transmigrates from one incarnation to the next (Trainor 58). Where Hinduism believes in the transmigration of the same, unchanging soul, Buddhism believes that good karma (leading a good life), will allow you to move up in hierarchy through the six realms of rebirth (*Bhavachakra*) and move closer to achieving nirvana and escaping the wheel of life, like the historical Buddha did.

Significantly, the word ‘reincarnation,’ which derives from Latin, means “entering the flesh again.” Lili, in *The Danish Girl* and *Man into Woman*, experiences a re-entering of her own changed flesh. Her surgeries assist in the expulsion of the Einar ‘side’ of her identity and leave her to solely inhabit her reshaped body. Perhaps here, conversely to a soul requiring a new body, Einar could be figured as a soul or mind who is ready to move on before his body fails, and this body must be re-inhabited by a different soul or mind. Just as Buddhists and Hindus do not recall their previous incarnations, Lili, in both *The Danish Girl* and *Man into Woman*, does not recall her life or body as being that also of Einar’s/Andreas’s. In *The Danish Girl*, when Greta asks Lili if she recognises the Bluetooth Bog where Einar was born, she says “‘I don’t think so.’ It troubled her, for she knew she should know the place: it had the familiarity of a face lost in the past” (291). In *Man into Woman*, Lili finds it significantly harder to remember Andreas’s experiences. In one of her diary ‘confessions,’ Lili speaks of the vague, dream-like quality of her past (250) and her inability to picture it clearly, if at all. This amnesia extends also to Einar’s recollection of Lili’s experiences in Ebershoff’s novel; however, it does not also extend to Andreas’s memories of Lili in *Man into Woman*. Ebershoff’s decision to give Einar a similar experience of amnesia to Lili functions to separate the self into a dual identity. Significantly, in *Man into Woman*, “Lili had gained such

predominance over Andreas that she could still be traced in him, even after she had retired, but never the reverse” (21). Lili’s continual presence, even when appearing as a man, implies that she has always been there, that Andreas has really been Lili all along.

Where *Man into Woman* carries some hints of the prevalent discourses available in narratives of transition today—Lucia, for example, in *The Secret Life of Luke Livingstone*, knows that she has always felt female—*The Danish Girl* contains even fewer references to the possibility that Einar and Lili could be the same person. There is one instance in Ebershoff’s novel when Greta talks to Lili about when “we were married” (285). When Lili says “[i]t was you and Einar,” Greta insists “I know it was Einar. But really, it was you and me” (285). The complicated ambiguity that Ebershoff borrows from *Man into Woman* oscillates between the idea that Einar has really been Lili all along and that Einar and Lili are two different beings living in the same body. I further analyse these narratives of identity in my next chapter. Here, it is important to consider the way Ebershoff’s novel explores the possibility, hinted in Lili’s memoir, that Lili might have dissociative identity disorder (multiple personality disorder).

Ebershoff positions most of the novel’s medical and psychological professionals as antagonists to Lili. Ebershoff uses the character of Dr Buson to explore the ambiguity implied in *Man into Woman* – does she identify as a woman or is she two different people? Buson compares Lili to a patient “who believed he was five people, not just two,” (176) and tells Lili that he can ‘fix’ her too. It is apparent that Ebershoff does not share Dr Buson’s views; he instead invites his readers to question the pathologising of queer gender in both medical practice and social thought. Dr Buson’s patient with the five personalities is described as “very quiet, but happy;” however, Dr Buson is unable to predict who Lili will be after a lobotomy (177). Ebershoff’s inclusion of these details raises red flags for the reader about Lili’s autonomy. A lobotomy would not enable her to take charge of her life and it cannot

guarantee that she gets a desirable outcome. The description of Buson's post-operation patient as 'quiet' suggests that he is no longer a point of concern to others, that he is docile and complacent. Essentially, he has been repressed. Most people reading Ebershoff's novel will likely be aware, or will come to know, that Lili Elbe, being the first known recipient of male-to-female gender confirmation surgery, is an important icon in transgender history. Dr Buson's diagnosis of dissociative identity disorder locates Lili's experience of gender in the realm of mental illness and consequently undercuts her status as a transgender woman in the same way that being called "homosexual" (Ebershoff 169) or "hysterical" (Hoyer 18) does. Thus, Ebershoff explores Lili's ambiguous position between gender and mental illness while encouraging his readers to think about the problematic modes of thought that Dr Buson represents. However, Ebershoff's novel commits hypocrisy by 'killing off' Einar, just as a lobotomy might do. All traces of Einar's personality disappear once Lili undergoes her anatomical transformation, just as they might from having nerve pathways severed in the front of the brain.

In *Man into Woman*, when faced with the task of putting together her book of confessions, Lili finds that "I could not relate the story of Andreas's life in the first person. Nor could I employ the third person when speaking of my own life and experiences, after Andreas had vanished. I was too close to everything" (282). Her anxiety about writing in Andreas's voice reflects not only her blurred memory and her separateness from Andreas but also her *desire* to cut ties with her previous life. Although Lili speaks of how "Andreas and I really have nothing to do with each other" (244) and the book repeats the idea that Lili and Andreas are two beings "who had both taken possession of one body at the same time" (20), there are instances that contradict these claims. Lili insists that she will never paint, just to prove how very distinct she is from Andreas, who is a painter; however, she does indeed take a paintbrush to canvas (she never picks up a paintbrush in Ebershoff's novel). She speaks of

Andreas as a dead man (275), but echoes of him often appear in herself – for instance, when she tells her art pupil, Ruth, that “I owe it to Andreas that I am now able to guide your first steps into your art” (271). Her claim that “I was too close to everything” (282) carries the underlying implication that she is too much like Andreas. Her feeling of closeness is weighted with anxiety, almost as if she is haunted by who she used to be. Indeed, Lili’s rigid insistence that she and Andreas are two different beings implies that she is ashamed of ever having been anything but female. It is this shame that drives Lili to prove just how female she is. Rachel Carroll, in her book *Transgender and the Literary Imagination*, draws on Einar’s shame at being homosexually aroused, explaining that “[e]xperiences of shame play a pivotal role in Einar’s narrative as imagined by Ebershoff” (148). Einar’s anxiety about being misrecognised as a homosexual compels the transition into Lili, and enables Lili to use her sexual desire for men to ‘verify’ her femininity within the compulsory heterosexual frame – “if Lili is attracted to men,” Carroll argues, “she must be female” (152).

In addition to proving her femininity, Lili must also prove she has outgrown girlhood and has arrived in womanhood. Prior to her operations, Lili is constantly depicted as a child in Ebershoff’s novel. She is called “[l]ittle Lili” (219), “little girl” (153), and “little Danish girl” (236). She is projected into a figured adolescence, a narrative decision that strips her of her autonomy and her right to be taken seriously. She receives the same kind of treatment from other adults that sixteen-year-old Grady receives in *Parrotfish*. Grady’s school principal, like similarly antagonistic figures in young adult fiction, tells Grady that “[t]eenagers rarely know what’s good for them” (Wittlinger 54). This comment draws explicit attention to the common belief that young people do not have the knowledge, wisdom or maturity required to claim and express their identities. The treatment Lili receives in *The Danish Girl* implies that she is incapable of having autonomy in her own life, which is a problematic narrative decision when compared with Hoyer’s Lili.

In *Man into Woman*, Lili is described as having “the freshness of youth” (21), especially in contrast to the male version of herself (Andreas), who “felt tired and seemed to welcome death” (21). Ebershoff appropriates and emphasises this idea of a difference in age between Lili and her male counterpart. In *The Danish Girl*, Einar is thirty-five, but Lili insists that she is twenty-four: “she certainly wasn’t as old as Einar” (88). In *Man into Woman*, the Matron who cares for Lili during her operation tells her that “the new ovaries which the Professor proposes to ingraft upon you will give you new vitality and new youth. The woman who is to be operated upon is, in fact, scarcely twenty-seven years old” (172). To this, Lili enquires “[i]s it really true, Matron, that the age of a woman is determined by her ovaries?” (172). In both books, Lili has her underdeveloped ovaries removed and replaced by fully developed ones, and it is in this sense that Lili steps over the threshold of figured adolescence into adulthood. However, although other characters in both texts recognise her arrival in womanhood, Lili does not feel that she is the fully “complete” (178) woman Grete observes her to be in *Man into Woman* after her ovary transplant.

Grete writes in her diary that “my husband . . . has now become a woman, a complete woman. And this human being was never intended to be anything but a woman” (178). In *The Danish Girl*, Grete’s brother Carlisle insists that “[s]he’s a grown woman” (274) and suggests that Lili could live alone now she has recovered from her operations. In both texts, following her surgery, Lili is predominantly considered to be a woman, and no longer a girl; however, upon the request of her hand in marriage, her sense of her own womanliness falters. In *Man into Woman*, Lili’s suitor (Claude Lejeune) insists that “[y]ou are an adult woman, but you often seem to me like a child. You ought to have somebody who would be both a mother and a husband” (263). Perhaps it is Claude’s words and the way he still calls her “little Lili” (262) that make her feel inadequate in her current state of womanhood. Lili writes to a German friend, telling him that “[t]hrough a child I should be able to convince myself in the most

unequivocal manner that I have been a woman from the very beginning” (275). In *The Danish Girl*, too, the ability to have a baby means being able to “prove to the world—no, not the world, to herself—that indeed she was a woman” (281). This dependency on the reproductive capacity of the biological body to determine gender reinforces a problematic mode of thought concerning biological determinism. That Lili can only become a woman through having a child confines understandings of femininity within a narrow ideological framework.

Coming of age is figured in a number of ways in both *The Danish Girl* and *Man into Woman*. Fascinatingly, the fictional novel places more of an emphasis on this trope in relation to the wellbeing and health of its central character than *Man into Woman* does. There is a significant difference, prior to her operations, in the way Lili’s health and strength are depicted and the way other characters treat her in relation to her wellbeing. In *Man into Woman*, Lili is strong, fit and healthy. She plays the role of a “Parisienne” (78) in a theatrical performance, dances at a ball for hours on end with Claude and dresses up as the boy Cupid for a water-carnival on the Loire because no other woman is a strong enough swimmer to risk the dangers of the “treacherous winds” at Balgencie (82). *The Danish Girl*, by comparison, depicts a weaker, more vulnerable version of Lili Elbe, which highlights the necessity of fiction to work within narrow narrative and representational perimeters. Since *Man into Woman* operates primarily as an autobiography and biography, it does not need to rely on literary conventions and fictional tropes to make it a fascinating read – its fascination comes from the fact that it operates as an important piece of trans\* history. Ebershoff’s novel, being based in fact and on history, must offer some things that *Man into Woman* does not. Fiction has creative licence, which allows for mystery, tension, conflict, drama and character development. Thus, the novel takes a healthy woman and introduces these elements by representing her health as poor and her disposition as weak.

In *The Danish Girl*, Lili wakes up one hot summer morning with very little strength. The reader learns that “Greta and Einar had decided not to holiday in Menton. Mostly because of his deteriorating health. The bleeding. The weight loss. And, sometimes, his inability to hold his head up at the table” (205). Carlisle (Greta’s brother) and Hans (Einar’s childhood friend) must help Lili out of bed as if she is a sick child. They call her “[l]ittle Lili” as they lift her from the bed, bring a cup of milk to her mouth, dress her, and bring her to the window (206). Although, in *Man into Woman*, Andreas is noted to be “very ill” (107), Lili does not appear to be weak until after her operations, which is understandable considering their experimental and taxing nature. Ebershoff’s decisions create a pathologising effect in Lili’s representation. He makes Lili a helpless child despite the real Lili Elbe being a strong and able woman. Where *Man into Woman* takes Lili as a strong woman and witnesses her loss of strength through surgeries, *The Danish Girl* takes Lili as a weak girl and allows for her to become a stronger woman.

In *Man into Woman*, Andreas writes in a letter to a distant relative that “[o]ver-exertions, her own sufferings, have left [Lili] unscathed. She has contrived to work for two, now that I am no longer worth much” (Hoyer 31). Lili’s determination to live and to survive places her in an admirable position. Her achievements, too, allow her readers to feel respect for her. She notes in a letter to her German friend her desire for “others to understand me” (280); indeed, she achieves more than this; she is a strong, capable woman of whom feminism can be proud. Lili, in *The Danish Girl*, by contrast, achieves sympathy and understanding but little more. Instead of being the active hero of her own story, she is presented as a passive victim. The title of the novel, which emphasises her girlhood rather than her womanhood, further strips Lili of her autonomy and makes her appear helpless. The sense of Lili’s entrapment within Einar confirms her status as a victim: “[s]omething made [Einar] feel as if his soul were trapped in a wrought-iron cage: his heart nudging its nose

against his ribs, Lili stirring from within” (85). Conversely to *Man into Woman*, where Lili is empowered by her ability to constantly do favours for others, in *The Danish Girl* she appears as helpless as a child in the way she must always be assisted by others. She is described as “frail” (62) and is always escorted or accompanied outside to social events and appointments with medical and psychological professionals. Lili comes of age in Ebershoff’s novel when she returns home to Denmark after her initial surgeries. Here, she gets a job she loves and thrives in, and spends a great deal of time wandering off alone to meet up with the man she agrees to marry. Lili performs her daily activities with a vitality and energy that she initially did not have, thus marking her coming of age and arrival in womanhood.

Lili experiences another, more dramatic form of coming of-age when she starts bleeding, much like an adolescent girl starts to bleed. Norman Haire writes in the introduction to *Man into Woman* that “[Andreas] began to suffer from disturbances every month in the shape of bleedings from the nose and elsewhere, which he came to regard as representative of menstruation” (Hoyer vi). This bleeding functions as a kind of beginning of puberty, marking Lili’s passage into and through adolescence. Lili, in her autobiography, very seldom mentions these occurrences; Ebershoff, however, employs bleeding frequently in his novel. In *The Danish Girl*, Lili’s bleeding does not always occur on a monthly basis, as it is said to do in *Man into Woman*, giving it a more mysterious and dramatic nature. Instead of purely being a symbol of her womanhood, the bleeding also becomes a symbol of her sickliness. At an artists’ ball, Greta takes Lili in her arms when she discovers the blood running from Lili’s nose and speaks to her “softly, like a lullaby” (59). This lullaby-like voice and the holding of her wife like a child is intended to soothe but it also takes away any opportunity for Lili to act independently. Lili is therefore depicted as helpless, a victim to the bleeding that she does not yet understand. When out with Hans, Lili discovers blood in the lap of her dress. Her alarm at the sudden bleeding is reflected by her immediate urge to run away. As she runs, the blood is

described as “spreading as persistently, as appallingly as a disease” (94). The description of the bleeding as a disease implies how unwelcome the bleeding is and the way it has control over her. Diseases are things that impair functioning, that get in the way of life, and, in extreme situations, can kill. The application of this term reinforces Lili’s position of passivity, rendering her powerless to fight the ‘disease.’

Besides the alarm Lili experiences with her unexpected bleedings, an added dimension of shame comes into play when she is presenting as Einar. One night, when Lili and Greta are eating supper, Einar “excused himself, leaving a little red spot on the chair” (97). Just as Lili flees when she presents as a woman, she flees too when presenting as a man, only for different reasons. When Lili presents as a man, Greta tries to ask her “about the bleeding, about the cause and source, but each time Einar turned away in shame” (97). As a man, Lili tries to dispose of all evidence of her bleeding, such as bloodied rags, in order to hide its occurrence. These differences tie in to the idea of dual identity, which I unpack in the next chapter. If they are indeed separate identities, Einar is threatened by the bleeding in a way that Lili is not. Lili’s initial embarrassment and fear shift into an acceptance that most women acquire after having experienced regular periods for some time. Einar, however, sees the blood as a symbol of his own death to come. His concealment of the bleeding’s evidence is an attempt to reject his imminent death. It is not until later in the novel, when Einar figures that he must die for Lili to live, that he understands what the bleeding means:

[w]hen he felt the first spurt of it on his lip or between his legs, he would become dizzy. No one would tell him this, but Einar knew it was because he was female inside. He’d read about it: the buried female organs of the hermaphrodite haemorrhaging irregularly, as if in protest. (170)

The novel employs the language of monstrosity, of Lili being ‘buried’ within Einar and fighting to escape. Assuming that the two are separate identities, where Lili sees the blood as a disease, Einar sees Lili as the disease, as the thing taking over and controlling his life.

### Character Growth: The Hero’s Journey

The texts I examine in this part of the thesis all set out on a traditional story arc – to move a character or a situation from one state to another. These stories involve themes of change and transformation, therefore aligning themselves with Joseph Campbell’s criteria for the ‘hero’s journey.’ Characters fulfil their dramatic potential by being brought to a low point and being stripped of the things they usually depend on, such as supportive figures, self-confidence, and certainty about their identities and desires. It is not until the central characters are made to forge their way in their lives without the resources they originally relied on that they can find new strength and start to undergo personal growth and change.

Poppy, in *This Is How It Always Is*, occupies a space of childlike innocence and naivety and must move past this stage to demonstrate who she is to the world. Poppy is a child who is growing up for the first time. Frankel employs Poppy’s youthful innocence and ignorance to highlight a societal preoccupation with body parts that many authors of trans\* fictions likewise attempt to address. Frankel employs characters in her novel who reflect the same notion conveyed in Judith Butler’s famous assertion that the ‘[p]hallus does not constitute the entirety of [a person’s] worth’ (*Undoing Gender* 72). However, in the book’s attempt to sound accepting and open-minded, it aligns itself with some of the biases it claims to challenge, therefore failing in both content and form to unsettle dominant gender ideologies.

Joseph Campbell, in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, talks about the literary convention of the ‘monomyth’:

[t]he full round, the norm of the monomyth, requires that the hero shall now begin the labour of bringing the runes of wisdom, the Golden Fleece, or his sleeping princess back to the kingdom of humanity, where the boon may redound to the renewing of the community, the nation, the planet, or the ten thousand worlds. (167)

While in many examples of heroes’ journeys, the bringing back of a physical object of labour is the convention, it is also possible to see how the monomyth operates in a more symbolic sense. Where the knights of the round table, for example, must overcome enchantresses and opposing knights and endure long tiring journeys on horseback, central characters from many popular trans\* fictions must overcome bullies and internal conflict and endure the long tiring journey of learning about the world around them. Where the knights return to Camelot with damsels in distress, an object of the hunt, small fortunes or, even, the holy grail, the central characters in trans\* fictions assist in the renewing of community with a different kind of boon. Many of these characters, after being pushed from the societies they inhabit, must leave forever or find their way back; if they return, they bring with them a reinforcement of the status quo in the shape of the boon of consolation, possessing certainty about their identities and the ability to teach acceptance to others.

Poppy, in *This Is How It Always Is*, follows the traditions of the hero’s journey and the monomyth through a process of being outed at school, learning about the meanings other people associate with her body parts, achieving spiritual enlightenment in Thailand and then returning to school with the boon of wisdom and the capacity to teach others. Before being outed at school—and unlike narratives about transition, where characters often possess strong feelings of hatred towards and discomfort with their bodies—Poppy does not express any

initial dissatisfaction with her biological sex. Rosie's (Poppy's mother) colleague Mr Tongo, who provides support throughout Poppy's journey, states that "she's totally normalized her penis. It doesn't connote maleness for her. It doesn't mean anything. It's just how she pees" (182). Rosie notes that Poppy's "penis is as unremarkable to her as her elbow. For something that's the focus of all that's coming and the zenith of the trouble here, she doesn't give it a second thought. It doesn't signify maleness to her" (207). The book presents two very different perspectives on Poppy's penis: the pre-sexual child's certainty about girlness and the adults' anxieties about her incongruence. Poppy is too young to be preoccupied with what it means to have a penis; Rosie and Penn are the ones who worry about what having a penis could mean for Poppy. This parental anxiety is especially evident in the novel when Rosie goes out of her way to walk around their home naked, attempting to make Poppy notice that she, unlike Poppy, does not have a penis. Rosie and Penn's preoccupations with genitalia are further emphasised by the fact that Penn goes "vagina shopping" (233) online and starts considering the possibility of surgery for his ten-year-old child. This option is alarming, especially considering Jay Prosser's view of gender confirmation surgery as a form of self-inflicted violence: "if the bodies operated on are not already wounded or deformed, then the surgery itself must wound or deform" (Prosser, *Second Skins* 81). Perhaps Frankel's novel hopes to instil similar thinking into the minds of its readers.

Although Frankel's positioning of these opposing views—of maturity versus innocence—is clearly intended to get her readers thinking about the importance adults tend to place on genitalia, it is disrupted by the fact that other children Poppy's age, too, are curious about what kind of genitalia she has. Part of her journey into adolescence involves becoming aware of everyone's preoccupations with body parts. Poppy's realisation of how much her peers care about genitalia arrives when she is outed at school and most of the children insist that she would only need to pull her pants down to settle the matter. Where some characters

in trans\* fictions have the opportunity to ‘come out’ before being outed (such as Grady in *Parrotfish*), many others, like Poppy, do not. Lucia, in *The Secret Life of Luke Livingstone*, comes out to her family and some close friends but she cannot control being outed to her colleagues, community and acquaintances when a photo of her in feminine attire is released on the internet. Riley, in *Symptoms of Being Human*, is outed at a conference for his/her<sup>1</sup> father’s political campaign before s/he gets a chance to come out to his/her parents. Amanda, in *If I Was Your Girl*, is outed in front of her whole school at her homecoming dance by a friend she thought she could trust.

### The Closet

‘Coming out’—or the revealing of one’s identity—is an important process regarding both sexual identity and gender identity, and a significant literary trope in trans\* fictions, especially those that follow the tradition of the bildungsroman. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick asserts that “the epistemology of the closet has given an overarching consistency to gay culture and identity throughout this century” (*Epistemology* 68). This consistency means that people with nonconforming sexual identities—and this readily applies to people with nonconforming gender identities as well—will always be unified by one thing – that they must decide whether to stay in the closet, leave it altogether, or step in and out as required or desired. Sedgwick explains that “there can be few gay people, however courageous and forthright by habit, however fortunate in the support of their immediate communities, in whose lives the closet is not still a shaping presence” (68). The closet, in one sense, can play

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<sup>1</sup> Significantly, *Symptoms of Being Human* is narrated in the first person, allowing the author to avoid the dilemma of suitable third person singular pronouns. Out of all the novels examined in Part One, this is the only text with a central character who navigates a specifically genderfluid identity. Yet, the text situates Riley’s gender in relation to binary norms, highlighting a fluctuation between masculinity and femininity. Referring to Riley in this thesis requires an unavoidable use of third person pronouns, which must appropriately reflect the character’s gender. Although a fluid gender identity might typically invite the use of ‘them/them’ pronouns, I choose to refer to Riley with the combined ‘s/he’ and ‘him/her’ pronouns to reflect the binary construction of his/her gender.

a role in shaping a person. For example, someone who is out of the closet may feel more liberated and open about who they are than someone who is in the closet, meaning that the closeted individual is probably more anxious about being outed. These feelings may translate to behaviours that others might interpret as secretive or anti-social.

Further to the possible shaping influences of the closet when comparing someone who is out with someone who is not, is the idea that the closet, and how someone interacts with it, will always be a part of them. As Sedgwick, notes, someone who is out will likely wonder how a new person they have met will act or react (68) when they find out their interlocutor is queer. Regardless of whether this uncloseted person's thinking is anxious, curious or amused, the closet is ever present in that person's history and future. There will always be new people in a queer person's life who may be more prone to heteronormative thought and therefore make heteronormative assumptions about the queer person they meet. In order to make this point, it is necessary to indulge in some stereotyping. A cisgender straight man, for example, as accepting of diversity as he may insist he is and, indeed, may be, must contemplate the closet in a very different way. A straight man can never prove that he is *not* homosexual – it is always an internal possibility. His identity is a norm but he must actively maintain and perpetuate this norm. He therefore justifies his desire for women through the presence of his phallus and reminds others of his male identity through his interest in rugby, his masculine swagger, or his preference to wear boxer shorts and to tightly crop his hair. It is in this way that he performs gendered identity in relation to dominant discourses of masculinity. Through his own need to prove how straight and cisgender he is, he projects these beliefs onto others, thus viewing the world in a heteronormative light.

Although the future holds uncertainty about who will be in it and how they will react, the past, and the moment of coming out, will always have a defining role in a queer person's life, especially where some suffering has taken place. It is in this sense that one's decision to

come out (or lack of decision to do so) is a coming-of-age moment. Poppy's experience of being outed at school leads to a process of learning and spiritual enlightenment which allows her to embrace her identity. It is only through embracing who she is that she can move on with her life, that she can leave her childhood innocence behind and step towards the maturity of adolescence. Similarly, after Amanda is outed at her homecoming dance, she and her dad realise that "[t]he girl who moved in with me wouldn't have been okay after that homecoming dustup" (Russo 255). Amanda cultivates new friendships and a relationship with Grant which allow her to feel confident about fitting in and being herself. When her dad explains his concerns about Amanda being triggered into attempting suicide again, she replies "I think maybe I'm stronger than that now" (255). Being outed at school and the consequential harassment from Parker, instead of breaking her, makes Amanda stronger. It is through her ability to overcome suffering that she can go back to school and face everyone as an uncloseted transgirl. She no longer needs to wonder who will react to her and how, as she did when she was in the closet – her schoolmates either accept her as she is or they do not. With the sentiments of moving forward and not necessarily knowing who will challenge Amanda, the novel ends on the very clear resolution that Amanda has symbolically come of age. She stands on the threshold to adulthood, where the reader knows she will have a good life and will face down potential adversity in her future. The novel offers closure in terms of the narrative threads it ties up—she goes back to school—and the questions it answers: yes, Amanda will be okay because she is strong.

Similarly to Amanda, Lucia in *The Secret Life of Luke Livingstone* must prove her strength when she is publicly outed before she is ready to do so herself. In addition to her interaction with the closet, which is very similar to Amanda's—she suffers, overcomes adversity and returns to work—Lucia's experience of being outed provides a convenient progression of the plot by resolving the novel's conflicts. One of the biggest hurdles Lucia

overcomes in the novel is earning back the love and company of her family members. Being outed throws her back into the midst of her family, forcing them to come together and find the shared strength for Lucia to face the world as an uncloseted transwoman. It is therefore only through coming out that Lucia can achieve her own coming of age by re-earning her place as a respected and loved adult figure in her family. By the conclusion of *The Secret Life of Luke Livingstone*, Lucia stands on the threshold to retired life and familial bliss.

The authorial drive to follow the traditional narrative arcs of the bildungsroman and the hero's journey reflects not only a need to maintain literary convention but also an impetus to perpetuate hegemonic gender. In following the constraints of narrative and convention by having characters develop according to a trajectory of social acceptance in heteronormative, cisgender society, popular trans\* fictions that encounter rebirth tend to reinforce dominant gender ideologies, demonstrating that it is easier to convey messages of conformity than it is to challenge notions of binary and congruent gender. The next chapter further explores these patterns, exposing the problematic tropes and conventions at work in popular fiction representations of queer gender.

## Chapter 2: Narratives of Identity

The previous chapter examines how central characters in contemporary popular trans\* fictions find their way towards a sense of self through rebirth and coming of age. This chapter critiques trans\* representations in relation to tropes concerning binary articulations of the self, the body as a vehicle for expressing identity, the reinforcement of dominant gender ideologies, the role of performativity and the language of death. In her article “Djuna Barnes, History’s Elsewhere, and the Transgender,” Ery Shin argues that *Ryder* and *Ladies Almanak* “are united by their interest in mythical transgenderism, but the transgender effects no radical inversion of the queer status quo” (20). Many popular trans\* fictions fail to unsettle dominant understandings of gender by attempting to communicate trans\*-positive messages but contradicting themselves instead. They fail to challenge the status quo by relying on problematic representations of identity, such as the queer subject as being caught in the ‘wrong’ body, the queer subject as two people fighting to live in the same body or the queer subject as having a ‘true’ self. I draw on theories of fluidity and performativity to expose how the trans\* fictions in this chapter provide limited understandings of what it means to have queer gender.

Kate Drabinski and Jennifer Putzi both insist that constructing narratives about transgender experience is challenging when you are seeking different narrative devices from the conventional model of ‘wrong-body’ discourse. In “Incarnate Possibilities,” Drabinski speaks of the binds that transgender writers face “as they seek to give accounts of themselves in idioms that break from the medical model” (316). Putzi likewise argues that many writers “find a frame for their own experiences in wrong-body discourse, one that allows them to make sense of their identities to themselves and to others” (428). Unlike Drabinski and Putzi, who primarily examine queer work by trans\* writers, I focus on texts written predominantly by non-trans\* writers but I also include work by one transgender writer, Meredith Russo. In

this chapter, I examine how wrong-body discourse operates alongside narratives of identity to make the subject more easily understood, offering critique on how these narratives employ devices that confine the complexity of queer genders to a limited space. These narratives tend to reinvest in ideas of both singular and double identity, getting caught in a paradox that fails to transcend the problem of the binary subject in trans\* literature. The characters' considerations of a 'true' self and a 'false' essentialise identity and lead to problematic questions about gender congruence, gender performativity and death. These tropes reveal the strict genre conventions the novels work with, which tend to lead the ostensibly queer content into the realm of safety, conformity and, ultimately, failure.

#### **Binaries of the Self: True or False? Right or Wrong? Singular or Double?**

Charity Norman's *The Secret Life of Luke Livingstone* employs two paradoxical devices to conceptualise Lucia's identity. One of them is to claim that who she is has not changed, which represents a fixed, singular identity. The second device contradicts the first because it involves two identities occupying the same body, one 'false' and one 'true,' which represents a double identity. The way Lucia's identity is conceptualised in Norman's novel fixes Lucia within the very binaries the novel appears to interrogate but fails to move past. These binaries—male and female, old and new, false and true—confine the queer within a limited space and restrict the potential modes of being that can exist between and outside these categories.

For those who are threatened by the changes in Lucia, Lucia tells them she is the same person so they will know that she is not dangerous (Norman 70). Her need to prove that she is not a menace to her family or to society is the book's attempt to critique associations of monstrousness that can be associated with trans\* identities. Of course, statistics show that transgender and other gender-nonconforming people are far more prone to being the victims

of violence than performing violence. Human Rights Campaign advocates tracked 29 violent deaths of transgender people in the United States in 2017 (Human Rights Campaign, “Violence,” par. 1). Shockingly, these statistics continue to rise, with 44 fatalities in 2020 and at least 57 in 2021 (Human Rights Campaign, “Fatal Violence,” par. 1-2). Norman’s novel, like many others, wants to move away from transphobic stigmas that would suggest trans\* people are to be feared. Positioning trans\* characters as regular victims of abuse makes them more sympathetic to the reader and highlights the dangers of having queer gender. It therefore seems important to communicate the idea that Lucia is the same person she has always been because this is easier for people to understand and less challenging for those who are confined by binary and static ways of thinking.

Lucia’s daughter, Kate, the most accepting member of her family, views Lucia as unchanged. She notes that Lucia “looked like a kind, anxious man—or maybe a kind, anxious woman, now that she thought about it. Either way, it was her dad: the same person she’d loved all her life” (190). This claim is contradicted by the fact that Kate later chooses to call her dad ‘Lucia’ instead of ‘Dad’ because she finds the male word no longer fits and is too jarring. Kate defends Lucia in a pub when people stare and laugh:

“Let me tell you something about my father.” Kate’s voice carried across the hushed room. “She’s a bloody good woman. She’s a hell of a lot better-looking than you. She’s a very successful lawyer and she’s got time for everybody. And she doesn’t judge other human beings after one glance.” (341)

Kate’s outburst effectively silences everyone but, more importantly, it celebrates Lucia’s queerness. The use of the male word ‘father,’ in conjunction with the female pronoun ‘she,’ opens the potential to queer the narrative by refusing to conform to notions of congruence. Yet, this potential is soon closed by an inevitable return to the convention of pronominal

stability, a principle that emphasises the hegemonic values of consistency and familiarity. This consistency of pronouns reflects the ideology of binary gender congruence. Even Kate, who insists upon the futility of binaries, ultimately conforms to binary logic when she decides to call Lucia by her chosen name. Kate is a very important character in the novel because she represents the author's acknowledgement of the different ways it is possible to have gender and resist binaries. Her decision, however, to call her dad 'Lucia' conforms to binary expectations of gender congruence, demonstrating that narrative threads must be brought together and anything that refuses to fit into a tidy category must be made to fit anyway. Thus, the transgender, in this book, fails to unsettle normative regimes of gender and the narrative resolves with a complete alignment of Lucia's affirmed identity: she is accepted as female by her whole family, undergoes gender confirmation surgery, dresses in feminine attire and is consistently referred to with feminine pronouns and titles. By the end of the novel, even her grandson Nico calls her 'Abuelita' (Spanish for 'Granny'), thus confirming her one-hundred percent arrival in womanhood and suggesting that she cannot truly be Lucia, cannot truly be a woman, until every feminine nuance aligns for her. The same impetus for congruence applies to Lili, in *The Danish Girl*, which I discuss in this and the next chapter.

When Lucia comes out to her family as a woman, she insists that "I'm the same person I've always been" (70). However, the novel regularly marks out Lucia and Luke as distinct people, even in the narrative structure and labelling of chapters. The novel oscillates between a consistent self which can be recognised as the same regardless of gender, and the notion of a 'true' self or "real self" (139) hidden beneath a false self. In a letter Lucia sends to her direct family members, she explains that "[i]t's as though the real me is smothered underneath the false one—alive, unable to speak or move" (179; italics in original). This view, although marking out masculine performance as 'wrong' for Lucia, is limited and does not accommodate the way humans can change and inhabit a multiplicity of spaces. Fluidity is

a concept that has been explored for centuries by great thinkers, all the way back to Ancient Greece. Now, in the twenty-first century, and especially with the help of the internet, notions of fluidity and discourses of identity are starting to become a topic that more people (not just scholars) can engage in. Judith Butler argues that “gender is made to comply with a model of truth and falsity which not only contradicts its own performative fluidity, but serves a social policy of gender regulation and control” (“Performative Acts” 528). Judith/Jack Halberstam takes issue with a similar binary trap regarding wrong body discourse, posing the question, “what do articulations of the notion of a wrong body and the persistent belief in the possibility of a ‘right’ body register in relation to the emergence of other genders, transgenders?” (*Female Masculinity* 142).

Bearing in mind Heraclitus’ views of ever-present change, it is possible to identify changes that manifest in Lucia throughout her transition that might be seen as a part of her fluid process of identity; however, these are positioned in problematic ways. Despite saying she is the same person she has always been, Lucia develops some new personality traits once she starts transitioning. For example, Eilish notices that “[t]he old Luke never used to bubble over with news; he was reticent and careful” (228). When Eilish comments that “Luke would have had a large white hankie in his pocket, ready to whip out if his nose was running,” Lucia replies: “Lucia is hopelessly disorganised. I find the lack of pockets confusing” (351). The different clothes she now wears reinforce a new set of rules that govern her behaviour – she cannot make gentlemanly offers of a handkerchief if she wears clothing without pockets. Her referral to herself in the third person highlights the way she thinks of Lucia and Luke as two distinct people. The reader is constantly reminded of this distinction throughout the novel, especially since some sections are narrated by Luke and others are narrated by Lucia. In her novels, Norman frequently employs multiple perspectives to explore the impacts and effects of personal problems on different characters. Usually, the different perspectives are centred

around a family. In *The Secret Life of Luke Livingstone*, Norman employs five narrative perspectives: Luke, Lucia, Eilish, Kate, and Simon. After the preface, the novel starts its first chapter with narration from Luke. It's not until about a quarter of the way through the novel that Lucia makes her first narration. As the book progresses, narration switches between the five narrators and Lucia's narration starts to make more frequent appearances. However, it is not until about two-thirds of the way into the book that a significant shift occurs – Lucia switches from narrating in the third person to narrating in the first person, a moment that marks her growing confidence in presenting as a woman and sets her narrations on even footing with Luke's, which are consistently in the first person throughout the novel. When Lucia makes her first outing dressed as a woman, she notes that “Lucia had never been out in her life” (105) and then thinks about how “[i]t was a strange double life; it took me an hour or so to change from one person to the other—not physically, but mentally. Sometimes I accidentally used the wrong voice or body language” (300). The shift back and forth, between Lucia and Luke, and the heavy investment in the idea of the two being separate entities, relies on conscious acts of performativity and gender congruence. In establishing Lucia and Luke as opposites and making Lucia conform to white middleclass English notions of femininity, the novel reinforces the gender binary and fails to project the queer into more complex territory. It is significant that the construction and performance of Lucia's identity are phenomena carried out on and by the body.

### **The Body: A Vehicle for the Performance of Identity**

In Laurie Frankel's *This Is How It Always Is*, Poppy learns about the significant roles of the body. According to the feminist Susan Bordo, “[t]he body—what we eat, how we dress, the daily rituals through which we attend to the body—is a medium of culture’ (Bordo 2240). Poppy must grapple with her uncertain feelings of gender in a society that believes appearance

and bodily acts determine and are determined by gender. It is these expectations and repeated practices that Poppy sees around her which lead her to break down and think she must make her outward appearance match her genitalia. In an unhappy regression to masculinity, Poppy wears her brothers' most boyish clothes, telling her family that she does not deserve to be Poppy (Frankel 242). This section of the novel also witnesses a significant shift to the masculine third person singular pronouns 'he' and 'him' as well as a switch from the name 'Poppy' to her birth name 'Claude.' When Poppy draws her brother Ben's attention to her masculine haircut, her masculine clothes, and her penis, she tells him "I am a guy . . . look at me" (223-4). Ben tries to explain to Poppy that external signifiers, such as clothing, hair and body parts, do not define a person's gender. Yet, what does define gender?

Despite the novel's rejection of clothes, hair and penises, and their capacity to define gender, it relies instead on a similarly problematic set of performance-related criteria to explain why Poppy is a girl. Examples of criteria include how Poppy walks, talks, laughs and plays. Her actions, utterances, movements and mannerisms, which seem to be considered as less deliberate than external bodily markers, are apparently reliable details to define gender. The issue with these apparent 'facts' is that actions, utterances, movements and mannerisms are culturally internalised phenomena that perpetuate dominant gender stereotypes. Their meaning is not intrinsic; it comes from a set of often unconscious but otherwise widely accepted social expectations about 'appropriate' performances of masculinity and femininity. Poppy is a girl who skips, sways, giggles, drops French casually into her sentences and sits demurely. However, this not the only way to be a little girl. Some girls stomp, laugh booming and sit in 'unladylike' positions. Just like Lucia, Poppy constructs her gender in a way that conforms to social expectations of femininity.

Although the novel conforms to congruent gender expectations through Poppy's character—she likes feminine clothing, has exclusively female friends, has stereotypically

feminine interests, and has no trouble ‘passing’ as a girl—it claims, contradictorily, that gender incongruence should be celebrated. One instance is when Rosie, Poppy’s mum, says to Penn, Poppy’s dad, that “[m]aybe we need to medically intervene so Poppy doesn’t grow a beard. Or maybe the world needs to learn to love a person with a beard who goes by ‘she’ and wears a skirt” (Frankel 237). Frankel’s novel takes the ‘safe’ road, positioning Poppy as an unchallenging character so readers can accept that tiny insignificant detail – the presence of her phallus. The book appears to encourage its readers to embrace diversity and multiplicity. The challenge with embracing the queer is that you have to take risks and do things differently. Frankel merely gives the impression of taking risks, especially regarding how she ends her novel on hopeful notes to do with the Buddhist ‘Middle Way,’ the unpredictability of the future, and the possibility for Poppy to exist outside of binary expectations. Despite the novel’s supposed investment in fluidity, it insists on a clichéd sense of girliness for Poppy, especially since the novel maintains her interests in princess dresses and the colour pink. Furthermore, after Poppy’s spiritual enlightenment, the novel demands a return to normalcy. Poppy goes back to school, narrative threads are pulled together when her best friend accepts her again, and a re-establishment of the status quo, in terms of gender congruence, occurs when Poppy returns to her feminine clothing and habits.

A similar preoccupation with dominant gender ideologies occurs in the famous David Reimer case of the 1970s. When David Reimer’s penis was “accidentally burned and severed in the course of a surgical operation to rectify phimosis” (Butler, *Undoing Gender* 59), Dr John Money suggested David undergo gender confirmation surgery, be raised as a girl (Brenda) and undergo gender conditioning. Dr Money saw Brenda as an experiment in nature versus nurture (which raises a whole set of complications on its own) and Brenda eventually decided she wanted to be David again. David’s testament to his feeling like a boy is as follows:

“I looked at myself and said I don’t like this type of clothing, I don’t like the types of toys I was always being given. I like hanging around with the guys and climbing trees and stuff like that and girls don’t like any of that stuff. . . . But that [was] how I figured it out. [I figured I was a guy].” (Butler 68; edits in original; my ellipses)

David, like Poppy, believes that genitalia, even in absentia, determine what a person likes to wear and how they like to act. His sense of himself is inescapably ideological. David, like many of the characters I examine in this part of the thesis, expresses the notion that the things he likes to do and wear define and justify his gender. Yet, since when do certain clothes and behaviours define a person? Butler likewise asks, “in what world, precisely, do such dislikes count as clear or unequivocal evidence for or against being a given gender?” (70). Indeed, if clothes do not, in fact, make the man (or the girl), why is Poppy led to believe that, as Miss Appleton insists, “[l]ittle boys do not wear dresses . . . Little girls wear dresses. If you are a little boy, you can’t wear a dress” (91). Why does this rule exist? Furthermore, why does the novel contradict its insistence on breaking the rules by following them, instead?

### Congruence, Conformity and Consistency

Many examples of young adult trans\* fictions likewise rely on themes of congruence and conformity as the characters forge their paths into adulthood. Amanda, in Meredith Russo’s *If I Was Your Girl*, is completely feminine, has gender confirmation surgery before the age of 18 and is attracted to boys. Luna, in Julie Anne Peters’s *Luna*, is interested in stereotypically feminine attire and activities (such as dresses, the colour pink, and nail polish), is attracted to boys, and leaves her hometown at the age of 18 to receive gender confirmation surgery. There are, of course, some exceptions to these repetitive tropes, but even these are not without their fair share of contradiction, conformity, and/or congruence. Riley, in Jeff

Garvin's *Symptoms of Being Human*, identifies as gender fluid but regularly aligns with stereotypes regarding masculinity and femininity when his/her 'gender compass' shifts.

On his/her first day of school at Park Hills High, Riley opts for jeans, his/her dad's old Ramones T-shirt, and synthetic Doc Martins. Riley sees this outfit as being neutral and "chooses these clothes and this hair cut specifically to avoid being stuffed into one pigeonhole or another" (28). Riley reasons that s/he must settle in a safe middle zone to be accepted but knows that this feels "fake, like I'm in costume" (30). In order to feel comfortable and to cope with his/her moments of dysphoria, Riley feels s/he has to dress and act in ways that match wherever his/her masculine/feminine compass is pointing (Garvin 29). More regularly than not, his/her compass oscillates between masculinity and femininity. It is in the novel's representation of Riley's ideas of femininity and masculinity that the novel reinforces dominant gender stereotypes. Riley's idea of being feminine involves lip gloss, dresses, purple hair highlights, a straight back, and closed legs. His/her idea of being masculine involves beanies, thumbs hooked into his/her jeans pockets, a lean in his/her walk, baggy T-shirts, unclean jeans, and hair teased into a fauxhawk. Despite the novel's attempts to celebrate fluidity, it relies heavily on stereotypes of masculinity and femininity to convey fluidity. Is it not possible to have the novel's genderfluid character feel feminine in a pair of Docs, masculine with closed legs, or androgynous in lip balm? Garvin's novel, like so many others, invests heavily in dichotomies to do with gender because of a need to play it safe and draw on the known. There are, of course, some exceptions.

Grady, in Ellen Wittlinger's *Parrotfish*, identifies as male and acknowledges that he is not and cannot be as masculine as some people might expect him to be. However, some contradiction occurs in the novel about whether his identity is something 'new' or something that has always been there. In some instances, Grady makes statements such as "I forgot changing your gender was not even a question for most people" (99). In other instances, he

notes that “[e]very time the teacher said, ‘Boys line up here, girls over there,’ I’d had to think consciously about which line I should stand in. I’d wanted to play soccer on the boys’ team when I was nine, but I wasn’t allowed to, so I stopped playing altogether” (105). Similar contradiction appears regarding the changes in Grady’s life. In some instances, he claims he’s “deciding to live as the other gender” (33) and talks about “my new gender” (88-9), but in other instances, he insists that “I really don’t have a choice . . . I *am* a boy” (54). He oscillates between the idea of his gender as something new and something that has always been there, communicating a contradictory message about gender as either inherent and static or as having the ability to be shaped and changed.

Perhaps the novel is trying to use these contradictions to draw the reader’s attention to the constructedness of gender and the futility of binaries. Grady notes that, if there were not such a need to divide people into the categories of ‘boy’ and ‘girl,’ then “I wouldn’t have needed to make a big deal out of being a boy” (106). Wittlinger challenges the very notion of gender itself, drawing attention to its spectrum-like nature and the multiple ways in which it is possible to have gender. This is achieved when Grady’s friend, Sebastien, draws a charming analogy between gender and a football field:

[w]hat if . . . you put the most macho guy you could think of—say, Bruce Willis or somebody like that—on one end of a football field, and the most feminine woman you could think of—say Scarlett Johansson or . . . Beyoncé—on the other end . . . [and] if you had everybody else on earth lined up in between them according to how masculine or feminine they were, there would be a lot of people in the middle of the field, you know? Not everybody would be standing next to Bruce or Scarlett. (128; second ellipses in original)

Despite analogies such as this one, which promotes a pro-queer message, there are narrative, representational and dialogic decisions that contradict Wittlinger's agenda. The way the narrative describes Grady as living "as the other gender" (33) emphasises the very gender binaries the novel claims to challenge. Small decisions, such as to have Grady be interested in females, take away from the queer interest of the novel. Grady describes himself as "plain old heterosexual male" (21) and uses wrong body discourse to explain that "inside the body of this strange, never-quite-right girl hid the soul of a typical, average, ordinary boy" (9).

Wittlinger clearly wants her readers to see Grady as normal, in order to make his one difference—that he has a vagina and XX chromosomes—as unchallenging and understandable as possible. However, in normalising him to the novel's readers, *Parrotfish* confirms the pattern of failure at work in popular trans\* fictions by failing to unsettle the binaries and stereotypes that queerness seeks to deconstruct in the first place. The novel considers the way in which Grady's masculinity is not stereotypically macho or sporty but it does little more to unsettle the reader or give them anything to question. *Parrotfish* further falls into the category of the 'safe white' text in the way that the form remains conventional: there is resolution and a sense of narrative threads being pulled together. It follows the traditional comedic arc, complete with high school bullies as antagonists, and ends with problems solved, antagonists overcome, and that warm feeling of closure you get when you are not made to think too much.

### Gender Performativity and the Language of Death

Lucia, in *The Secret Life of Luke Livingstone*, unlike Grady, does not think about different ways of embracing her gender. She relies on gender stereotypes of British upper middleclass femininity to express herself. In doing so, however, she demonstrates an awareness of her own performativity. She notes that "[s]he had been acting a part all her life; now, it seemed,

she must act another” (106). Although gender performance, as argued by Judith Butler, is largely an unconscious act, Lucia is conscious of the performances she must make. Her awareness of her acts of gender is a crucial aspect to her journey because it hints at the kind of performativity involved in drag and cross-dressing, which reveals the construction involved in all gendered performances. Despite Lucia’s insistence that she is not a drag queen, cross-dresser, or transvestite, the novel’s investment in a double identity complex echoes the traditions of drag in a subtle way.

In the beginning of Norman’s novel, Luke is the reality and Lucia is the drag act, complete with wig, accessories and clothes that do not always fit or suit well. Unlike drag performers, she is nervous that people will see through her (106) and discover her ‘act;’ however, her lack of experience wearing feminine apparel leads her into the parody territory that helps define the second sub-type of drag that Volcano and Halberstam describe (36). Although many Drag Queens make deliberate parodies of femininity, often drawing attention to the fact that a male is masked under the feather boas, fake hair and excessive make-up, Lucia makes an accidental parody of femininity, her lack of familiarity with women’s clothes, make-up, and accessories giving her a similar appearance to the hyper-feminised Queens that perform on stage. Her clothing marks her shift back and forth: “I took off Luke’s suit and shirt and tie, and became Lucia” (240). As the novel progresses, Luke becomes the act and Lucia becomes the reality: “I began to think in Lucia’s voice, with her words. She was the reality now. Luke was a fancy-dress costume I donned for work” (300). This switch, while leading to Lucia’s happiness and comfort with herself reveals the parody involved in all performances of gender. The curious thing about Lucia’s insistence on separating herself from drag, is that, “[i]n imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure [of gender] itself” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 137; italics in original). The parody so integral to drag demonstrates that “the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation

without an origin” (138). Ironically, in her attempt to impress the ‘truth’ of her identity, Lucia unintentionally draws attention to the fact that gender is neither ‘false’ nor ‘true’ – it is a simulation of nothing, which gives an impression of something. This nothingness, in marking out gender for what it really is, leads me to question why the figurative ‘death’ of old identities can be seen in such a literal way.

It is through the ‘killing’ of Luke that Lucia can experience the rebirth and renewal mentioned in the previous chapter. The language of death in relation to transgender characters’ birth names or previous selves is a common convention in trans\* fictions. In Julie Anne Peters’s *Luna*, when Regan (the person from whose perspective Luna’s story is told) looks at before-and-after photos of Luna’s friend Teri Lynn, Regan notes to herself that “Teri Lynn, the male, seemed to be another person altogether. A dead-person, the way Liam appeared sometimes. Sad, vacant” (126). By contrast, Teri Lynn, when presenting as a female “blossomed and sprung to life” (126). These stark differences carry the implication that the death of Teri Lynn’s male ‘self’ made it possible for her to live as a ‘separate’ female self. Likewise, in *The Danish Girl*, it is not until Einar ‘dies’ that Lili can live. Indeed, Greta understands Lili’s need to be rid of Einar so well that she goes as far as trying to get a “death certificate for Einar Wegener” (260). After Lili’s operations, Greta observes that “[h]er husband was no longer alive . . . Once again, Greta Waud was a widow” (238).

Similarly, when Lucia mentions the possibility of surgery to her wife, Eilish asks “where does this leave our marriage? You want to kill Luke. You want to make me a widow” (131). Eilish’s ‘deadnaming’<sup>2</sup> of Lucia, in conjunction with her accusation in the words ‘kill’ and ‘widow,’ emphasises the idea that Lucia and Luke are, indeed, two separate identities.

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<sup>2</sup> The term ‘deadname’ has been in use since about 2014 on the internet, in articles and across various media platforms. In an article for the website *Healthline*, the queer, nonbinary writer K. C. Clements explains that “[d]eadnaming occurs when someone, intentionally or not, refers to a person who’s transgender by the name they used before they transitioned” (par. 4). Clements explains that deadnaming can be a reductive, invalidating, and disrespectful action against a transperson.

Eilish believes that the removal of Lucia's penis is not just equivalent to the final destruction of any remnants of Lucia's manhood but also to the final destruction of Eilish's husband altogether. While it is possible to understand the metaphor of death that Eilish employs (there are indeed aspects of Lucia's old self that disappear and change once she starts her transition), the reader also gets a sense that Eilish feels Luke's impending 'death' in a literal way. Eilish fears that she will lose every aspect of the person she was married to for thirty years and will be left with a replacement that she does not know. Just as Lili takes precedence and Einar becomes as good as dead, Lucia and Luke, too, cannot coexist forever. Only one identity can inhabit the body.

Early in the *The Secret Life of Luke Livingstone*, Lucia tells her family that "[i]nside me was a laughing girl, with long hair. I called her Lucia. Every time I went to sleep, I prayed that when I woke up I'd have become Lucia" (75). The idea that Lucia is 'inside' Luke suggests not only that Lucia is fighting to overcome Luke, but as if Lucia grows inside Luke, almost like a foetus grows in a womb. *The Danish Girl* employs similar language and imagery. Einar tells Doctor McBride that "[t]here's another person living inside me . . . A girl named Lili" (168). Lucia notes that "[w]eek by week, shyly, Lucia was taking over and becoming me—or perhaps I was becoming her" (Norman 233). The idea that Lucia grows inside Luke and is taking over uses the kind of vocabulary that narratives of monstrosity employ. Monsters can be things that grow, possess and thwart. The novel's use of language pertaining to monstrosity is problematic since, as mentioned earlier, the novel deliberately challenges notions of monstrosity. The language reverses with "or perhaps I was becoming her" (233) to avoid these notions of monstrosity but it remains clear that Lucia must thwart Luke in order to experience fulfilment. It is not until Lucia undergoes gender confirmation surgery at the end of the book that there's a sense of closure for Lucia.

Earlier in the book, Lucia tells people that she does not know whether she will have surgery and that it does not matter, at least not for the time being. However, the novel seeks to uphold genre imperatives and keep its readers satisfied by providing answers to questions and tying up narrative threads. The book could easily have ended with the reader not knowing whether Lucia will have surgery but it chooses not to. The second-to-last chapter in the book closes after Lucia's surgery with the orderly saying to Lucia: "Good morning, madam" (371). Lucia's claim that she has never forgotten these words signifies their importance to her. Furthermore, the way they sit at the bottom page gives a strong sense of finality, as if to say that only now is she a woman. The way the orderly "looked excited, as though she had a present for me" (371), implies that Lucia's surgery is the gift that conclusively makes her a woman. The final chapter marks out a very clear future for Lucia: one of familial bliss and easy leisure. There is no question that Lucia will have an enjoyable retirement. This comforting conclusion demonstrates that Norman's novel seeks to solve the problems it raises and offer answers to the questions it asks. The tidy narrative resolution conforms to the genre conventions expected of this type of domestic and ethical fiction, closing things down and leaving the casual reader with a feeling of satisfaction. Despite the final paragraph's claim about not knowing what the future has in store for Lucia and Eilish—"we have adventures to come" (374)—the reader goes away with a strong sense that the future will be a reflection of this pleasant family holiday and that life's challenges have already been overcome.

The closure at work in Norman's novel reflects a wider impetus towards conservatism. Many of the authors examined in this part of the thesis, like Norman, are careful not to confront the reader or cause harm or offence. They present an agenda that attempts to sympathise with the plights of queer gender experiences; yet their representations reinforce the pathologisation of trans\* identities. As popular genre fictions, these texts follow prescribed tropes and formulas; they fail to unsettle hegemonic understandings of gender

because it is easier to maintain dominant logic than it is to resist it; it is easier to explore what is known from a slightly different angle than it is to venture into unfamiliar territory. By choosing closed and limited methods for narrating queer gender, popular genre fictions representing trans\* identities remain in the territory of the safe and the known, offering comforting and unchallenging messages that reinforce binaries and stereotypes of gender as something ‘wrong’ that needs to be righted, something ‘false’ that needs to be made true and something fixed and singular that only has space for ‘one or the other.’ In representing queer gender using a lens of normalisation that seeks to make difference accessible and understandable to the cisgender reader, popular trans\* fictions regulate gender deviance and confine it within limited understandings of binary, conformative and congruent gender. Moreover, to be taken seriously, authors also tend to avoid subject matter that might make their work look ‘trashy.’ I turn to the subject of sexuality and desire in the next chapter, where there exists more potential for texts to be edgy and transgressive.

### Chapter 3: Sex and Desire

Jason Cromwell's chapter "Queering the Binaries" (1992) discusses the complications of binaries to do with bodies, sexual orientation, and gender identity, arguing that "[b]ecause transsituated identities and bodies are different, sexual desires likewise defy the binary of heterosexual and homosexual" (130). In many of the fictional narratives I analyse, trans\* subjects are often forced into sexual categories that limit the way in which they can feel desire and be objects of desire. As a result, these characters often become desexualised. Just as the attempt to "fit everyone into a nontransgendered paradigm, medico-psychological practitioners have attempted to desexualise transpeople" (Cromwell 130), fictional subjects' sexual lives, too, are extinguished. In some cases, hormone replacement therapy plays an important role in limiting sexual desire; in other cases, it is an anxiety about perversity and an impetus to regulate social norms that oppresses the desires of trans\* characters. The stripping and altering of desire in characters with queer gender is problematic because, as Cromwell highlights, trans\* people are not, as some authors depict them, without sexuality. While some authors draw attention to and intentionally critique societal oppression of trans\* desire, many also tend to limit the possibilities for their characters to experience sexual desire. This limitation reinforces a dominant ideology that perpetuates the representation of trans\* people as either perverse or without sexual desire. Furthermore, some texts, in attempting to critique oppressive ideologies pertaining to gender, reveal their hypocrisy by falling into the trap of collaborating with the very same ideologies they ostensibly oppose. This section examines the representation of medical oppression, the loss of libido and the relocation of sexual desire before discussing the restrictions of genre and convention.

## Medical Oppression

Varying forms of medical oppression are used as narrative devices in trans\* fictions of the twenty-first century. *The Secret Life of Luke Livingstone* uses the character of Doctor Ford to draw attention to the kinds of discrimination that medical professionals can enact. Doctor Ford (but not the novel) subscribes to the kinds of medical discourses which actively seek to oppress trans\* people and their sexualities. He refuses to acknowledge the validity of Lucia's identification as a woman and instead accuses her of erectile dysfunction, hormone imbalance and a midlife crisis. Lili Elbe, in *The Danish Girl*, experiences similar treatment: she endures dangerous x-ray therapy at the hands of Doctor Hexler, is said to be deluded and to have a 'demon' inside her (115), is called "homosexual" (169) by Doctor McBride, diagnosed with schizophrenia by Doctor Mai (171), and told by Doctor Buson that lobotomies are excellent solutions for "people with behaviour problems" (176). Ebershoff, like Norman, is drawing the reader's attention to the kinds of medical and psychological practices that attempt to regulate that which does not fit societal norms.

These texts establish moral 'villains' in a predictable way that conforms to expectations of novels whose central plights revolve around a protagonist needing to overcome an antagonist. In Norman's, Wittlinger's, Peters's, Russo's, Garvin's, Frankel's and Ebershoff's novels, the reader is never troubled with any anxiety that the villain might win. These 'villains,' being generally unlikeable, are set up as characters who the reader can feel superior to. Establishing doctors as antagonists, in the cases of *The Danish Girl* and *The Secret Life of Luke Livingstone*, therefore becomes a means of critiquing and challenging the types of attitudes that seek to apply incorrect labels and force trans\* people into limited and oppressive categories. However, the very fact that the villains are overcome—Lucia and Lili both become congruent women, in spite of what their doctors insist is wrong with them—reaffirms the safety of the genre conventions they operate within. These are novels

preoccupied with resolution and conformation because solved problems are more palatable to the reader than unsolved ones. This ‘safety’ is reinforced by the fact that, every time a barrier is reached, there is a yanking back, both in terms of convention and content.

In *The Secret Life of Luke Livingstone*, Doctor Ford believes that Lucia’s sense of her own femininity is due to something going wrong at a biological level. He assumes that Lucia has erectile dysfunction and prescribes Viagra and exercise, without listening to her protests that she has no issues in this department. Norman uses Doctor Ford to establish conflict and tension in the novel, and to critique his attempt to re-sexualise her as a man, which confines the possibility of her having sexuality as a woman. Ford is intensely uncomfortable with the person who comes into his office, looking and sounding like a man but calling herself a woman. This discomfort demonstrates that Doctor Ford is not someone who is willing to accept or accommodate gender incongruence. Ford’s position as ‘villain’ in the novel therefore encourages the reader to embrace what he does not, reminding the reader that the book promotes a tolerant, sympathetic view. Despite the novel’s position of sympathy, it depicts Lucia as being as stereotypically feminine as possible. Due to Doctor Ford’s investment in congruence, he cannot fathom Lucia as a sexual being; due to the novel’s investment in congruence, Lucia is denied the possibility of having sexuality at all. Yet, the novel cannot step too far outside of heteronormative expectations, otherwise it might be seen as tasteless or inappropriate.

Doctor Ford’s discomfort with incongruence highlights the way that sexual orientation and gender can often be hastily conflated with one another. Viviane Namaste, in her chapter “Genderbashing” (2000), elaborates on the differences between sexual orientation and gender, arguing that “[i]n Western societies, gender and sexuality get confused” (140). Namaste’s reasoning is based on societal assumptions about sexual identity which are based solely on the presentation of gender. One of the major mistakes of heteronormative thought is

the assumption, for instance, that a gay man only wears makeup to attract other men because men are inherently attracted to that which is feminine. Although examples such as this may prove relevant for some people, it overlooks both the multi-faceted nature of desire and the possibilities that wearing make-up may imply. When confronted with Lucia and the complex possibilities she represents, Doctor Ford does not know how he should react to her and thus finds it much easier to understand the situation by thinking of her as without sexuality altogether.

Charity Norman's novels are typically family dramas and romances played out in relation to a social problem. In *The Secret Life of Luke Livingstone*, the social problem the novel addresses is the alienation of transgender people. It is in this way that Norman wants her readers to sympathise with and understand Lucia. It is therefore important to have Doctor Ford antagonise her through attempts to stifle her sexuality. When she enquires about hormone replacement therapy, he asks her "D'you know what effect they'll have? They'll shrink your testicles—it's basically castration. You'll lose your sex drive and you'll grow breasts. You'll become a she-male" (118). He warns her of these effects as if they are the worst things that can happen to her. These effects, however, are mostly what Lucia wants. She is at war with her 'male' body, is taunted by her sexual dreams of Eilish and wants nothing more than to grow breasts. However, Lucia has not heard the term 'she-male' before and, when she asks Ford what he means, he curls his lip and tells her "[n]either one thing nor the other. For heaven's sake! Go home to your wife, be grateful for what you have, and let me get on with my job" (118). The term 'she-male' is a point of concern for Lucia because her greatest wish is to be like other women. She wants to walk the streets without people knowing she used to walk them as a man. However, Ford's warnings do contain some truth, despite their exaggeration. Nothing is mentioned about her testicles but she does start to grow breasts, she does appear somewhat androgynous, and she does, indeed, lose her sex drive.

Since the novel positions Doctor Ford as an antagonist, *The Secret Life of Luke Livingstone* falls into its own trap of failure by fulfilling Doctor Ford's predictions in problematic ways.

### Loss of Libido and the Relocation of Sexual Desire

Whether it is due to the hormones or her belief in the hormones' effects, Lucia's sexual desire dissipates as she progresses through her hormone replacement therapy. It is made clear that Lucia had an active sex life with her wife, Eilish, before Lucia comes out as a woman. Usha Sharma, her counsellor, also warns her that starting hormone replacement therapy (HRT) could seriously impact on her sex drive. Usha tells her that, "[i]f you begin HRT, you may well find you lose libido . . . your preferences may alter" (148). Lucia claims that, for her, sex is about expressing her love for her wife (148); however, before she starts HRT, she frequently feels sexual desire for Eilish: "I thought about Eilish all the time. Often I dreamed I was making love to her—as a man, as a woman, did it matter? The passion and closeness of those dreams would stay with me long after I woke" (147). Sexual desire is a significant part of what makes humans human; although many people also identify as asexual – as not experiencing sexual attraction at all. The quelling of Lucia's sexuality, despite her belief that this is an effect of HRT, is problematic because it is also a convenient plot device to keep the narrative tidy. Giving in to convention and convenience, therefore, is one of the ways in which Norman's novel fails to unsettle the regime of the normal; it takes away an important aspect of Lucia's humanity, just as Doctor Ford predicts.

Alongside the risk of losing libido, Lucia's therapist warns her that starting hormone replacement therapy could alter her sexual preferences, and asks Lucia: "[h]ow would you react if you began to feel an attraction to men?" (148). Unlike Lucia, Lili, in *The Danish Girl*, does not undergo hormone replacement therapy. Perhaps she does not need to, since, as her memoir, *Man into Woman*, demonstrates, she already has more female hormones pumping

through her body than male hormones. Professor Kreutz tells her that one examination “reveals between eighty and one hundred per cent of feminine characteristics. The examination of your blood has yielded a similar result” (Hoyer 55). These so-called ‘facts’ reveal a dated assumption about the essentialism of gender that authors of twenty-first century trans\* fictions often replicate in their attempt to avoid aligning themselves with a heavy reliance on gender stereotypes, an insistence on the ‘truth’ of gender as defined by biology and an urge for congruence and conformity. Lili’s blood results are not repeated in *The Danish Girl*, although hints are made at Lili’s developing female body. Greta wakes up one morning and notices the previously unrecognisable curve of a hip on Lili. Unlike Lucia, who experiences a change from having mostly male hormones to mostly female hormones, it is possible to argue that Lili has always had mostly female hormones and that they are simply developing. In this sense, it is curious that Lili’s sexual orientation shifts so readily according to heteronormative values of desire.

Early in Ebershoff’s novel, Greta tells the female subjects of her paintings, as they model for her, about her and Einar’s “longer and longer intervals between intimacy” (9). As the book progresses and Lili gets a stronger sense of who she is, her sex life with her wife, Greta, ceases. In both *The Danish Girl* and *Man into Woman*, it is made apparent that when presenting as a man, Lili has heterosexual desire. Although in *Man into Woman*, Lili, as Andreas, tells her friend Niels that “I have always been attracted to women. And to-day as much as ever’ (54), Ebershoff presents Einar as being attracted only to Greta. When presenting as a woman, it is clear in both books that Lili is attracted to men. It is possible to imagine how scandalous a sexual relationship would have been between Lili and her wife, especially since they have no choice but to divorce after Lili’s transition. It is therefore convenient that her orientation shifts so easily to suit early twentieth-century heteronormative social standards. Rachel Carroll argues that “*The Danish Girl* places considerable emphasis

on heteronormative constructions of sexuality in shaping Elbe's understanding of her gender identity" (*Transgender* 127). It does indeed appear that her sexual orientation is one of the ways that Lili is able to distinguish herself from her past life as Einar. In *Man into Woman*, Lili uses these details to make it explicit how "altogether different from her Andreas had been" (170).

Carroll's argument revolves around both *Man into Woman* and *The Danish Girl* as retellings of history as well as *The Danish Girl* as an historical fiction novel which finds many of its roots in *Man into Woman*. It is therefore important to think of the things Ebershoff does differently. While Ebershoff adopts *Man into Woman*'s convenient relocation of Lili's sexual desire to suit heteronormative expectations, he also allows himself a small amount of room to consider the queer. Ebershoff's decision to make Greta the only woman Lili, as a man, is attracted to works alongside Ebershoff's inclusion of a homosexual childhood crush to explore the possibilities of queer desire. Perhaps it is through her transition into a woman that Lili can avoid the dangers of homosexuality and openly act upon her desire for men. Ebershoff writes in the Author's Note that *The Danish Girl* is

a work of fiction loosely inspired by the story of Lili Elbe and her wife, Greta. I wrote the novel in order to explore the intimate space that defined their unique marriage, and that space could only come to life through conjecture and speculation and the running of imagination. (311)

Ebershoff's creativity is most evident in his inclusion of visits to the viewing booths of Madame Jasmin-Carton's brothel in Paris. Here, as Carroll argues, ambiguity arises about sexual identity and gender identity: "[t]he possible sexual and gender identifications available in this scene are multiple and ambiguous and do not exclude the homoerotic possibility that Einar is aroused by the thought of being the object of a man's sexual desire" (*Transgender*

151). If Ebershoff's creative inclusion of this scene is intended to explore the queer in its central character, it falls short in the way that Einar uses this situation as proof for Lili's heterosexuality. *The Danish Girl* thus tries to challenge heteronormative constructions of sexual orientation but returns too soon to collaborating with 'oppressive regimes of dominant ideology' (Halberstam, *Queer Art* 23), the dominant ideology here being heteronormativity.

Unlike Lili, Lucia's sexual orientation does not shift according to standards of heteronormativity, but almost everyone else in *The Secret Life of Luke Livingstone* expects it to do so. Lucia must constantly justify her sexual orientation to others when they falsely assume that she is attracted to men. When Lucia comes out to her wife, Eilish asks "[d]o you mean you're gay?" (29). She believes, because Lucia wants to wear women's clothes and express her femininity, that it must mean that she is a feminine man who is attracted to other men. Eilish assumes that Lucia wants to sleep with men and has never wanted her at all (29), making the same mistake as Doctor Ford, by confusing gender identity with sexual orientation. Lucia's children, too, make the same mistake. Lucia must constantly explain that "I don't fancy men. Not at all. This has absolutely nothing to do with my sexuality" (76). *The Secret Life of Luke Livingstone* often attempts to challenge assumptions regarding gender and sexual orientation. For example, in a moment of humour, Lucia considers getting a card printed to hand out to people: "[y]es, I was faithful to my wife. No, sex isn't especially important to me. No, I don't want to have sex with men" (137). Where Lucia does her best to explain that gender identity and sexual orientation are distinct from one another, Eilish struggles to separate the two. She sees Lucia's gender identity as a kind of sexual perversion. When Eilish finds Lucia's stash of feminine attire, Eilish wonders "[d]id he imagine himself wearing these things when he was in bed with me?" (76). After conducting some research about other transmen and transwomen, Eilish confronts Lucia: "[s]ome meet up . . . they have sex with people they meet on the internet. Is that what you've been doing? Have you been

fantasizing about sex with men, all your married life? Did you think about men when you were with me?” (130). Lucia does not understand why people persist to ask if she is attracted to men. Perhaps, it is easier to be without desire altogether?

Lucia positions love above sex, believing she can live without sex and wanting her desire to go away so she may find it easier to be around Eilish. Where Lucia’s desire recedes, however, Eilish’s does not. Late in the novel, when Lucia is publicly outed, she returns home to Eilish to face the community, their friends, and their colleagues. Alone together, parked in the driveway of their home, Eilish is suddenly overcome with desire for Lucia, who is dressed as a man, and puts her hand under Lucia’s shirt. When Lucia warns Eilish that “I’m not the same” (325), Eilish retracts her hand in horror: “I froze, terrified of what I might have been about to touch” (325). In this moment, any possibility of sexual intimacy between Lucia and Eilish evaporates. What could have happened, however, if Lucia had not warned Eilish? Would Eilish withdraw in a similar way? Or might she have discovered that she likes the changes in Lucia’s body? The reader is denied the chance to see where their relationship could go sexually, and the plot witnesses a reestablishment of the heteronormative status quo. Of course, it is important to take readerly prurience into account. Norman’s novel is constrained by dominant genre conventions. Although the initiation of heterosexual sexual activity and then the closing of a door on the characters may be acceptable in novels with romantic themes, the initiation of homosexual sex is likely to feel somewhat distasteful in a novel that cares about conforming to readerly expectations (the mainstream readership being white, middleclass, conservative readers). It is therefore on two levels that the narrative gives in to convention, thus perpetuating hegemonic values through its return to heteronormativity and its closing down of queer desire.

In a position where she denies herself the possibility of sex, Eilish tells her daughter that “I’m having to think again about what intimacy means” (355). Similarly, in *The Danish*

*Girl*, Ebershoff describes an intimacy that transcends sex: “[h]er knee touching his leg, her hand curled at his chest. It was as much as they touched each other now, but somehow it seemed even more intimate than those nights early in their marriage” (172). Eilish and Lucia both claim to not need sex so long as they have each other. Eilish and Lucia’s claims project them past the animalistic tendencies sometimes associated with sex and into a deeper and more spiritual understanding of one another. In many spiritual and religious practices, people can take vows of chastity to feel closer to God or to better understand themselves, others and the world. Buddhist monks, for example, relinquish all worldly possessions and pleasures to undergo a spiritual journey that could lead to enlightenment and, ultimately, Nirvana. Eilish appears admirable for sacrificing her sexual life; however, unlike monks, who generally choose their path, Eilish has no control over the direction of her relationship with Lucia. I like to think that Lucia would have embraced the opportunity to explore her sexual desire for her wife, if Eilish were only “a little bit bi” (354), as her daughter Kate terms it. Like her wife, Lucia claims to be above sex, to not need it; however she is denied the possibility of sex altogether, due to the novel’s strict conformation to genre conventions.

### Restrictions Imposed by Genre and Convention

Genre conventions restrict the possibilities that young adult fiction novels can explore regarding sexual content. With most YA fiction novels, it is acceptable to talk about sex but uncommon to include it, especially because of the young demographic portrayed and targeted at. The central characters in *Parrotfish* and *Symptoms of Being Human* are both questioned about how they have sex; each of their replies is a witty reflection on their youth, their inexperience and their imagination. Riley, in *Symptoms of Being Human*, blogs a response wherein s/he employs a “vulgar euphemism” about a plane landing in a hangar, then repeatedly taking off and landing again (114) to highlight both his/her lack of experience as

well as his/her interrogator's "nearly sociopathic disregard for . . . privacy and feelings" (114). Grady, in *Parrotfish*, reimagines the scenario of being asked how he has sex. He imagines himself saying

sex for us abnormal is very strange . . . First of all, we have to be in the same room as the person we're having sex with . . . [a]nd it really helps if we like each other a lot . . . [a]nd then we touch each other's bodies in places where it feels good. (197)

Grady's reimagined nemesis realises that "[t]his doesn't sound any different from regular sex" (197-8), which offers an important insight about desire as a universal experience. Poppy, throughout *This Is How It Always Is*, is mostly represented as her five-year-old self and her ten-year-old self (the novel has a predominantly chronological narrative, which finishes with her as a ten-year-old) and therefore has very little conception of what sex means. Her parents, however, when considering the possibility of gender confirmation surgery for Poppy when she is old enough, are concerned that surgeries might inhibit her ability to feel pleasure during sex. *If I Was Your Girl*, similarly to *This Is How It Always Is* and dissimilarly from *Parrotfish* and *Symptoms of Being Human*, treats the topic of sex in a serious manner.

Amanda twice experiences nearly having sex for the first time in *If I Was Your Girl*, changing her mind at the last minute and telling her boyfriend, Grant, that she is not ready and wants to slow down. Amanda is 18 years old, legally entitled to have sex and has already undergone, and healed from, full gender confirmation surgery. Perhaps Russo does not want to overwhelm her potentially young readers with content they may not be prepared for. However, it would be just as possible for these two characters to have sex, without giving any explicit detail. The novel, instead of focussing on desire, prefers to invest in emotions, highlighting Amanda's feelings for Grant as well as her hesitation and discomfort. Although it is not explicitly stated in the novel, Amanda's need to put off sex, in conjunction with the

fact that she must ease into the idea of being touched (142), can lead the reader to think that perhaps she is worried about her body. Body image is a relevant issue for many teenagers and one that is often represented in young adult fiction. In this way, Russo makes Amanda realistic, accessible and normal, just as she hopes to achieve – according to the Author’s Note. The novel’s inclusion of Amanda’s apprehension about sex limits the novel in two ways. First, it prevents the reader from seeing sex as a normalised practice for people who are transgender or have queer gender. Despite Russo’s insistence that she does not want her readers to take Amanda as a finite example of how to be transgender, the novel provides identical answers to the questions of what it means to be a transwoman that Ebershoff, Norman and Peters likewise offer. Together, the texts reinforce limiting stereotypes of what it means to be trans\*. Since none of these texts offers a sex life for their central characters, they together give the impression that sex is a taboo topic when it comes to having an alternative gender and that transwomen, or anyone else with a queer gender identity, cannot possibly be thought of as sexual beings who have desire or are desired after.

The second effect that the novel produces by prohibiting Amanda’s sex life is that it prevents opportunities for discussion about body positivity, which is something that could work in tandem with body image issues, if it hopes to make a didactic impact. Russo makes her agenda clear in the author’s note, telling her “trans readers” that “[y]ou are beautiful” (277). As a transgender person, Russo holds a great deal of power in the words she uses; they hold the potential to project people’s thinking outside of the status quo and disturb conventional understandings of gender. Yet, even Russo’s text conforms to the same conventional narrative perimeters that reinforce congruent, binary gender. The sentiments Russo conveys are important but they do not challenge the reader’s thinking. Messages of trans\* beauty are echoed in a few places throughout the novel alongside the encouragement to see others through open eyes. Despite these sentiments, the novel does not pursue them

much further than Amanda's appreciation of her own legs. It might be that, for teenagers, sex is one of the most vulnerable activities to engage in, not only in terms of the emotional investment and trust involved but also regarding body image and self-confidence. The experience of sex teaches you that bodies are not perfect; when you accept your own body, complete with its flaws, and someone else's body, complete with its flaws, and love both bodies as they are, you move from a place of adolescent inexperience to adult wisdom and maturity. Perhaps, in this sense, Amanda will not truly come of age until she experiences sex for the first time.

Through the opinions of characters like Eilish and Simon, Charity Norman's novel draws attention to the kinds of sexual practices that can exist in the trans\* community. Eilish and Simon see these practices as perverse but the novel does not wish to present Lucia in this light. By avoiding explicit sexual content, the novel achieves a safe distance from the realm of perversion. Norman's book's target market is reflected by its main characters: respectable, white, middle-age, middleclass adults. As previously mentioned, Norman's novels operate as middlebrow fictions preoccupied with family dramas and romances in relation to a social problem. These kinds of novels tend to approach their subject material from an angle of emotional and ethical seriousness to avoid looking 'trashy.' Family dramas and romances targeted at this kind of readership tend not to have explicit sexual content anyway but they can explore sexual relationships with respectable distance – for instance, ending a chapter as two characters take each other's clothes off and then jumping ahead so the reader is spared a surprise from the genre they thought they could rely on to be consistently 'safe' and satisfactorily modest. Norman's and Ebershoff's novels, from conventions that their genres dictate, must be subtle with the subject of sexuality. It seems, that through the absence of sexual activity, characters can achieve different understandings of one another and different kinds of intimacy. This idea of intimacy, which is more invested in emotions rather than

bodily preoccupations with sexual pleasure, is something that keeps Norman's and Ebershoff's fictions in the realm of safety and conformity.

The point of almost completely avoiding the topic of sex is for the text not to be mistaken as anything but a serious representation of the issues trans\* people face daily. It must be through a need to separate their work from the realm of perversity and sexual gratification, that many of the authors I have investigated, so far, avoid including explicit sexual content in their work, especially that which might disturb the heteronormative status quo and unsettle the delicate sensibilities of some people. An anxiety about being perceived as perverse can be seen in Norman's novel through the character of Simon, who calls Lucia a 'pervert.' He insists that "[y]ou want to put on a dress. You fancy men. I've met perverts like you before" (67) but Lucia constantly reminds Simon, as well as other characters and the reader, that "I'm not a man who likes to wear women's things . . . I *am* a woman. I'm a woman who . . . speaks in a deep voice . . . and pees at a urinal through tackle that shouldn't even be there" (139). The novel uses dialogue between Lucia and those who antagonise her to challenge negative assumptions about trans\* desire and safeguard its position as a 'safe' text. Perhaps if Norman were to include a sex life for Lucia in her novel, then readers would be put off. Audience is crucial to the selling and consumption of books and it appears that Norman, like other authors examined here, is not only aware of her audience but also determined to meet their expectations. Authors get caught in a trap of being concerned about being offensive, choosing instead to write to please audience. They tend to confirm what readers already know and tick the boxes of publication expectations so their book can fit into an easily identifiable category, be easily marketed and sold by the publisher and logically shelved in bookstores and libraries. The issue with meeting audience and publisher expectations, however, is that it does not advance anyone's thinking and it reinforces problematic stereotypes.

Through an agenda to promote sympathy, remain respectful of the sensitivities of their readers and avoid depicting their characters as sexually perverse, popular trans\* fictions fail to unsettle dominant understandings of gender by trying too hard to play it safe. This impetus can be attributed to a fear of disturbing that which is familiar. Through the stifling of characters' sexual desire and autonomy alongside the reinforcement of heteronormative values, these texts demonstrate how restrictions imposed by genre conventions and expectations lead to formulaic and reductive representations of queer gender. Although these texts occupy positions that attempt to promote trans\* acceptance and understanding, their conflation of queer gender with limited sexual desire and loss of libido perpetuates the stigmatisation of queer gender identities. These tropes pathologise experiences of queer gender and render trans\* individuals as other. Such representations become even more problematic when critiqued alongside tropes that situate characters with queer gender as mentally unwell and victimised.

## Chapter 4:

### Why So Serious? Mental Health, Victimisation and Humour

Many twenty-first century popular trans\* fictions seek to do justice and give homage to the real-life people who inspire their stories or upon whom their stories are based. What ensues is a variety of texts that contain dark themes and adopt serious tones to respectfully convey these ideas. Trans\* characters often experience mental health issues and become victims to prejudice and abuse. These are serious issues that authors of trans\* fictions deal with in serious ways. It is perhaps with a particular aim to be respectful that these authors approach such loaded topics with care. It is from an impetus to effect change that these novels feel the need to replicate the sad realities of oppression. Tropes of mental health and violence, therefore, appear regularly and with emphasis. Trans\* fictions deal with the kinds of social stigmas that their characters might confront in the real world, in the hope that readers will recognise such stigmas and empathise more strongly with the central characters. Due to authors' wishes to remain respectful, many choose not to use humour as a tool; however, some do – I examine the sparse use of humour in the second half of this chapter.

Although trans\* fictions that contain themes of mental health and victimisation have an admirable agenda to effect positive change, a problematic trope emerges from the nearly identical narrative patterns that these texts implement. Individually, these texts seem like they could say important things about queer gender and inclusivity; however, collectively, the texts form a reductive, one-dimensional representation of what it means to be trans\*. Cumulatively, these texts reinforce circular patterns of pathologisation by providing identical answers to questions of how to represent queer gender. They imply that being trans\* means being mentally unwell, a victim or a target. The forms that mental health can take in fiction include depression, anxiety and suicide. Forms of victimisation include bullying, harassment, violence and abuse.

## Mental Health

According to the World Health Organisation, more than 300 million people (of all ages) worldwide are affected by depression. According to the “The Report of the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey,” 40% of respondents had, at some point, attempted suicide (James et al 5). Considering how many people in the world are familiar with the effects of depression, it is no surprise that writers employ depression as a device to allow their characters to be better understood. Perhaps it is the hope of the authors that their books will reach the wider audiences of people who need educating about how much more prone to depression trans\* people are. This aim is laudable but the reliance on pathologising tropes becomes reductive. These texts, if read in isolation, have a stronger impact; however, taken as a collective, these texts can become somewhat interchangeable. There are a plethora of trans\* fictions that follow the same pattern in terms of incorporating themes of mental health.

Riley, in *Symptoms of Being Human*, experiences intense anxiety and often finds s/he is unable to cope in social situations. Riley’s anxiety relates to his/her background of abuse and harassment, especially in the lunch room of his/her present and past schools. S/he frequently flees from the school cafeteria to avoid the potential conflicts threatened by different groups of his/her schoolmates. The lunch room is a common location for the staging of harassment that trans\* characters face, especially in YA fiction. Amanda, in *If I Was Your Girl*, feels anxious about eating in the lunch room in her new school because of her past encounters of bullying. She is often on edge when she sits down to have lunch and occasionally has flashbacks to the harassment that she was victim to in her old school and desperately wants to avoid in her new school. Grady, in *Parrotfish*, although bullied the least, experiences antagonism from other students during a school-based lunch setting. Grady encounters bullies in his lunchroom who ‘accidentally’ spill their milk on him to force him

into a space where he must undress and thereby show his breasts, which his bullies believe prove he is a girl, not a boy. These young adult fiction texts demonstrate their interchangeability through the trope of lunchroom bullying. However, each of these characters within these texts has varying experiences of mental health.

According to the Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand, some causes of depression include, but are not limited to, stressful events, physical illness, childhood trauma, and social isolation (Mental Health Foundation, “Depression,” par. 4). Amanda, in *If I Was Your Girl*, attempts suicide in her early life because she believes that dying will be easier than coming out to her family and dealing with the harassment she receives at school. In her last year of high school, she is watched over closely by a protective dad who thinks she might try to kill herself again if her mental health issues get out of control. Luna attempts suicide in Julie Anne Peters’s novel, by overdosing on her mum’s prescription pills because she, too, believes she cannot face coming out and being a frequent victim of abuse. For both Luna and Amanda, their experiences of depression are related closely to their experiences of gender. Stressful events such as bullying and harassment function as triggers and could contribute to the cause of their depression. Their experiences of gender set them apart from others, often leaving them feeling alone and unloved. They encounter trauma every time someone challenges their right to exist in the world, which leads them to question if they should be in the world at all.

Although the causes for depression are complex with every individual, the experience of depression is almost identical across trans\* fictions, implying that, if this person did not have gender dysphoria, or gender identity disorder, or whichever medical term is ascribed to them in the novel, they would likely not have depression. Depression has many potential causes, each being different for every individual. The two primary modes of psychological thinking regarding depression are that sometimes it is due to a chemical imbalance in the

brain and sometimes it is caused by emotional trauma(s). Depression is, indeed, often correlated with gender dysphoria but it is not necessarily caused by gender dysphoria. Therefore, the cumulative implementation of depression across numerous trans\* fictions offers a one-dimensional impression of what it means to have nonconforming gender. Collectively, these texts imply that to have queer gender means to be mentally unwell. Although for many people with queer gender this proves true, it is not a universal truth for all trans\* people and has no place in defining who they are.

In Charity Norman's *The Secret Life of Luke Livingstone*, Lucia is consumed by a deep depression and is haunted by a voice that tells her she might as well kill herself instead of coming out to her family. This text, which mirrors the same limited and uniform account for gender and mental health mentioned above, is also an excellent example of the way mental health issues are used as conventions of fiction. The repeated reliance on themes of mental health highlights a convenient means of progressing the plot and creating narrative resolution. The voice that Lucia hears, which represents her depression, almost functions as an antagonist in the novel – it is like a character of its own. Lucia must overcome this antagonism for the novel's narrative arc to be complete. Just as she must overcome her depression so that she can be who she is, she must also successfully be herself to overcome her depression. Her mental health is so integral to the narrative that the story would not function without it. This idea is reflected in the regular appearance at the beginning of the book of the voice Lucia hears and its steady dissipation as the novel progresses.

Thankfully, there are some exceptions to this mental health trope. In *Parrotfish*, Wittlinger's central character, Grady, insists to others that "I don't have any problems" (66) and that he is "perfectly healthy" (4). Grady does not experience depression and only has everyday experiences of anxiety – which is to say, any anxiety he experiences is not crippling, unlike the anxiety that Riley copes with in *Symptoms of Being Human*.

## Victimisation

As Joseph Campbell's work suggests, characters must fulfil their dramatic potential by being brought to a low point and being made to fight their way out without their usual resources.

The commonplace use of harassment in trans\* fictions functions as a means of bringing characters to their low points, which therefore provides the necessary opportunity for a character to triumph at the end of the novel. Grady, unlike many other characters in the trans\* fictions I examine, has far more 'resources' to assist him in fighting his way out of his lowest point. Amanda, by contrast, believes herself to be without the support of friends and family, especially after being outed at her winter dance. Luna lacks the self-confidence to stay around and face the people she knows. Grady has an advantage over all these other characters – he has the support of his friend Sebastian, self-confidence in the way he does not run from his bullies or the people who know who he is and constant certainty about his identity as a boy.

*Parrotfish*, compared to the texts I am about to discuss, includes very minimal prejudice and harassment and no violence whatsoever. Grady does face some serious bullying but this is tame compared with what other trans\* characters undergo. Grady has milk spilled on him in the school cafeteria – an action designed to humiliate him and regulate his gender, since he must either undress in front of everyone or remain cold, wet and smelling of milk. This situation could progress negatively for Grady; however, someone comes to his rescue and offers him a spare shirt, meaning that Grady can go to the bathroom and get changed without experiencing further humiliation. Grady is called “freak,” “mutant,” “pervert” (58-9), “deviant” and “sicko” (94) but always has his friend Sebastian to stand up for him. Grady also comes close to being the victim of a cruel prank which would have him walking through the school corridors either with no clothing at all or in a ridiculous, hyper-feminine get-up, selected with the intended effect of emasculating him. Grady escapes this humiliating

situation, however, because his childhood friend Eve finds out about and divulges the plan. These examples of harassment that Grady must deal with do not place Grady on the low level that the ‘hero’s journey’ requires; instead, they function as a reminder to the reader of the lengths that some people will go to repress and regulate alternative gender. They are fictional examples of the very real way in which “we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 140). In the case of Grady’s school bullies, they believe Grady is deviating from feminine gender norms – their actions and verbal abuse are attempts to demonstrate that Grady cannot and should not be a boy. Danya’s insistence that “[if] I was like that, I’d just go ahead and kill myself” (94) emphasises her belief that queerness should be punished – Grady is different and should therefore not be allowed to live unless he conforms to her expectations of congruent gender roles.

Many examples of trans\* fictions likewise include the abuse and/or harassment of characters with queer gender to draw the reader’s attention to very literal forms of punishment (in Butler’s terms) that trans\* people face in their daily lives. Rosie, in *This Is How It Always Is*, operates on a transgender college student who comes into her hospital with a gunshot wound as well as “contusions, puncture wounds [and] visibly broken bones” (107). Riley, in *Symptoms of Being Human*, is hospitalised after being physically harassed. Amanda is beaten up in *If I Was Your Girl* when she is outed at homecoming. Luna, in Julie Anne Peters’ novel *Luna*, is stalked through the mall by a group of teenage boys who bully and verbally abuse her.

Lucia, in *The Secret Life of Luke Livingstone*, similarly to Grady, in *Parrotfish*, experiences very minimal harassment. Unlike Wittlinger, Norman chooses to employ other, less pivotal, transgender characters to make an impression on Lucia, her family, and the reader of how much danger Lucia could be in. Lucia’s friend Chloe, Simon’s university crush Jessica, and a girl called Fran from Jim Chadwick’s Hall of Residence are all employed as

victims of abuse. Simon shoves Jessica to the ground and nearly slices a broken glass bottle through her face, Fran gets beaten up by some other students before throwing herself to her death from the top of a five-storey university building and Chloe gets beaten to death when her date discovers she has a penis. These side characters are all positioned as critiques of society and its attitudes – not only for the reader of what can happen when you challenge normative regimes of gender but also for Lucia, who, in contrast to the side characters, manages to evade abusive situations. Lucia lives knowing what could happen to her. She hears the word ‘tranny’ shouted at her by drunks, is chased back into her London flat, and is partially strangled by her son Simon. As her family members learn of the danger she lives in every day by simply being herself, they grow more protective, understanding and loving of who she is. Perhaps it is the author’s hope that her readers, too, will experience increased feelings of protection, understanding and love towards Lucia.

These novels I have mentioned all employ harassment to demonstrate the lengths some people will go to repress and/or regulate that which challenges their understanding of what is normal. In *Parrotfish*, Grady becomes aware of how authority figures, such as the school principal, do not want him to “rock the boat” (55). In *Symptoms of Being Human*, Riley refuses to conform to gender norms and expectations – which is to say, s/he is expected to have one gender only and to stick to it. His/her harasser, Jim, tries to take advantage of Riley as a demonstration of power and dominance. Through sexual harassment, Jim expresses his rage and lack of understanding, attempting to make Riley believe that who s/he is, is not right or natural and that s/he must be punished for his/her deviance. While Riley’s and other trans\* fictions characters’ experiences with violence and harassment highlight an impetus to control and regulate gender, the collective force of these texts also creates a single-faceted view of what it means to be trans\*. Together, these texts imply that to be trans\* is to always be a victim or, at the very least, a target. They suggest that the only way to be transgender,

genderqueer, genderfluid, nonbinary, agender or gender-nonconforming is to be constantly aware of the forms of constraint that society (and many people in it) impose on them. Indeed, when Lucia leaves her London flat at night time, she is like a small animal trying to scramble to safety when she is hunted by a group of shouting drunks.

### Humour

As is perhaps to be expected with fiction that primarily deals with serious subjects in a respectful way, humour has little to no part in most of the texts considered in this part of the thesis. The rare examples of humour are therefore worthy of note. These examples of humour have two main purposes: either as a coping mechanism or as a marker of difference. The use of humour as a coping mechanism masks pain and discomfort – it provides the character with a means of hiding. Humour as a marker of difference is often self-deprecating and consequently. In their perpetuation of a limited range of stereotypes to do with being trans\*, these texts are excellent examples of the ways in which many popular trans\* narratives fail to disturb dominant gender ideologies.

In Norman's novel, humour in relation to gender identity is never used in narration, only ever in dialogue. Kate, Chloe and Lucia are the only three characters who make jokes about Lucia's identity. When Lucia discusses with Chloe her anxiety about her imminent coming out at work, Chloe remarks, "[a]nd every one of them wondering if you're going to have your nuts cut off! Oh my Lord, Lucia, they'll cross their legs when you walk by" (235). Chloe's use of the word 'nuts' is refreshing. Its colloquial bawdiness stands out in opposition to the conservative use of medical terms throughout the novel. With the word 'nuts,' Chloe comments on the culture of curiosity that cisgender characters have about Lucia's genitalia and lightens up the seriousness with which other characters question gender confirmation surgery. She is drawing attention to how ridiculous it is to define someone by their sex but is

also using humour to break up the sombreness of the moment and make Lucia feel less frightened.

*Parrotfish* stands apart from the rest of the trans\* fictions I examine in this section of the thesis, particularly because of its more creative and more frequent use of humour. Most of the novel's humour comes from the central character, Grady, who often makes jokes during serious conversations and regularly formulates amusing scenes in his head that reflect his views on his day-to-day interactions with others. Grady's use of humour, although more frequent and light-hearted than in other trans\* fictions, functions similarly to the humour witnessed in other trans\* fictions. Humour gives the impression that Grady is a relaxed person who does not take negative things to heart but it is really used as a coping mechanism. Wittlinger's novel deals with serious issues but, unlike other trans\* fictions, it does not deal with such issues in an entirely serious manner. The seriousness is broken up by Grady's ability to joke.

Grady's new friend, Sebastian, tries to demonstrate to Grady that he "is not alone in the animal world" (71) by telling him about the genderfluid nature of some species of fish, like the parrotfish, the two-banded anemonefish, slipper limpets and hamlets, and other things in nature like water fleas and slime mould (70). Grady, instead of showing his interest, jumps straight to the opportunity for sarcasm and a witty joke: "[f]leas and slime mould. Wow, I'm in good company. Does the hamlet fish carry around a skull and ponder suicide?" (70-1). This remark has a dual effect. Firstly, the image of Grady hanging out with fleas and slime mould is amusing and Grady's reference to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is one that anyone who has ever engaged with will be familiar with. The important reference here is suicide but in the context of humour. The reader can see how Grady's use of humour attempts to conceal but reveals his feelings of isolation and hopelessness. His comment, "[w]ow, I'm in good company" (70-1), draws the reader's awareness to the fact that Grady is losing his friend Eve,

who will not be seen with him in public. Furthermore, Grady's reference to Hamlet's pondering of suicide operates as a kind of foreshadowing to the possibilities that the book contains. As already mentioned, mental health and suicide are common tropes in trans\* fictions; it is only a matter of time until at least one of these issues is engaged with. Indeed, later in the novel, the school bully, Danya, talks passionately about how she would kill herself if she were in Grady's position. Despite the initial impression of light-heartedness and wit conveyed by Grady's comments, the reader is left wondering about whether Grady will make friends with Eve again and whether he will attempt suicide at some point in the novel.

Grady makes it explicit that he uses wit and humour as a coping mechanism: "I could endure my daily life [by] making up scenes in which I imagined all the rotten things people were saying behind my back" (110). In the scene which follows, Grady imagines a conversation in the school staffroom about him. The conversation ranges from Dr Ridgeway, who believes that the divorce of parents causes gender dysphoria in children (110-1), to Ms Unger, who stands up for Grady and puts Dr Ridgeway in his place. In between these opposing opinions are Ms Marino, who is clueless but wanting to help, Mrs Norman, who only cares about books and rules, Mrs MacCauley, who has no idea what is going on and mistakes 'gender dysphoria' for "Jenny Dysphoria" (111), and Coach Speranza, who agrees with Dr Ridgeway that Grady is "just a confused lesbian" (112) and takes the discrimination further by saying "[a]ny lesbian is a confused lesbian, dontcha think?" (112). Some of these mixed opinions offer reprieve for Grady, in the sense that he knows he has full support from at least one authority figure. Those who are clueless operate as comic relief for both Grady and the reader. Most significant in this scene, however, are the comments of Dr Ridgeway and Coach Speranza.

The scene is set up so that, when Dr Ridgeway makes his conflation near the beginning about divorce and gender dysphoria, Ms Unger proves him wrong immediately. Dr

Ridgeway's position as antagonist to Grady, in combination with the fact that Ridgeway makes false conclusions and problematic generalisations, means that the reader is not meant to believe him. Therefore, when Dr Ridgeway calls Grady a "confused lesbian" (112) and Coach Speranza agrees, the reader is also not meant to take either of them seriously. It is in this sense that the reader is given the opportunity to be amused by their ignorant assumptions. Speranza's comment that all lesbians are confused carries the discriminatory heteronormative view that a lesbian thinks she is attracted to women because she simply has not found the right man yet. This provocative statement is Grady's way of poking fun at ignorance. It is an invitation to the reader to join Grady in laughing at those who seek to oppress him. It is in this way that Grady uses humour to cope with pain and earn the sympathy of the reader.

Humour is similarly used as a coping mechanism in *The Secret Life of Luke Livingston*. Early in the novel, when Lucia comes out to Kate and Simon, Kate insists to Lucia that "[y]ou're having us on,' . . . She was still trying to giggle as though by laughing she could make it all a joke" (66). Kate continues to make jokes, to lighten the heavy and serious atmosphere. When Lucia offers to make them a cup of tea, Kate exclaims: "[a] nice cup of Earl Grey! How homely. See? You're Mr Conventional, after all" (72). Her jokes signal deep discomfort. Kate's use of humour is an attempt to mask pain and preserve the moments in which she thought she knew her dad. They are an attempt to avoid facing the fact that Lucia's news will break their family apart. When Lucia is about to leave, Kate tells her to "[s]od off, old man.' Brave Kate. She forced a smile, and stepped forward to hug me. 'Or old...whatever. I'll see you soon'" (80; ellipses in original). This moment represents Kate's attempt to keep her family together as well as her quickly growing acceptance of and comfort with Lucia's identity.

Despite Kate's and Chloe's attempts to bring lightness to heavy moments, it is only Lucia who feels one hundred percent comfortable joking about who she is. When Eilish

hesitates to find the appropriate word to complete the following sentence but does not want to offend Lucia: “they don’t want Rosa and Nico to have a...I don’t know what to call it” (202; ellipses in original), Lucia comes to her aid: “a tranny granny” (202). Her rhyming of the colloquial term ‘tranny’ (often seen as derogatory) with ‘granny’ is whimsical – almost like something you would find in Dr Seuss. Eilish does not find the joke funny but Lucia, in this moment, is comfortable embracing her queerness in a playful manner. This playfulness is the only example of its kind in Norman’s book. This playful rhyme reclaims a word that might be seen as offensive, depending on how it is used. Just like the reclamation of the word ‘queer,’ Lucia’s use of ‘tranny’ demonstrates not only how the meaning of language can change over time but also how Lucia has grown comfortable enough with her own identity that she can play with language in such a way. Moments like these provide a refreshing reprieve from the dark themes that can surround queer gender representation. Yet, Eilish’s discomfort reflects the self-deprecating nature of Lucia’s joke as well the way the joke reinforces the very stereotypes the book claims to challenge. The use of the word ‘tranny’ is a loose label and, just like every other label in existence, it cannot do justice to the summing up of a person. Furthermore, ‘tranny’ is a word that the novel otherwise employs in relation to antagonistic characters and is used to communicate their belief that her identity makes her perverted. Lucia spends a lot of time explaining that perversion has nothing to do with her gender identity; however, by calling herself ‘tranny,’ Lucia can be seen to unintentionally align herself with the very sexual practices she claims not to be involved or interested in.

### The Absence of Humour

David Ebershoff’s *The Danish Girl* is an example of a text that steers clear entirely of humour, a fascinating detail considering Lili Elbe’s autobiography, *Man into Woman*, contains several amusing, if slightly awkward, moments of humour. Lili enjoys a particularly

comical experience when she visits the art gallery where Andreas's paintings are exhibited shortly after some articles about her transformation appear. The exhibition "was now thronged by people who hoped to catch a glimpse of Lili Elbe" (Hoyer 255). Nobody recognises Lili and one particular lady says to her, "[t]ell me, miss, don't you think that the lady over there with the large feet and the necktie, who looks like a man, is Lili Elbe?" (255-6). Lili replies "[y]es . . . most decidedly that is she" (256). Lili appears to take great pleasure in stirring gossip. However, behind her delight is a woman who is hiding and trying not to be seen. A similar experience occurs at a manicure salon when "a Swedish lady enter[s] and exclaim[s]: '[h]ave you heard the story of Lili Elbe? Do you really believe there is anything in it?'" (256). Everyone in the room expresses the opinion that "it was perfectly true" (256), except for Lili, who, in a mischievous way, insists that "[t]his article is, of course, exaggerated," (256), causing all the ladies to agree that "all newspapers exaggerated something terribly" (256). While it is evident that Lili's primary intention is to direct unwanted attention away from herself, to hide in plain sight, her delight in doing so is contagious and refreshing. Lili claims that these experiences allow her to breathe again and enjoy life (257), in a way that she could not when she felt a need to hide herself from people (256). However, the reader still gets a sense that Lili does not want to be recognised as herself.

Lili's desire to go unrecognised works in opposition to the book's messages about rebirth [see Chapter One]. Perhaps Lili's rebirth is incomplete on a social level or more steps must be taken for her to reach a space of confidence and contentment. *Man into Woman* therefore operates on a different level from many popular trans\* fictions in the way that it leaves this loose end untied, this question unanswered. It is in this sense that Lili's need to hide behind humour, in *Man into Woman*, raises questions and opens things up for scrutiny – Lili is not the complete woman that Grete observes her to be after Lili's initial operations

(Hoyer 178). Lili's feelings of incompleteness encourage the reader to think about Lili's idea of womanhood in relation to both early twentieth-century expectations of Western femininity and the various ways in which the reader knows it is possible to be a woman today.

Internationally and especially in the Western world, the post-war period in which *The Danish Girl* is set was a significant time of social change and upheaval in women's lives. Internationally, this was a time in which young women rebelled against the confines of nineteenth-century gender arrangements, seeking more leisure, pleasure and independence. Influenced by powerful cultural forces, such as commercialism, the film industry and the beauty industry, this era was witnessed significant shifts in fashion, style and beauty standards. Trousers, knee-length skirts and more comfortable clothing became more socially acceptable for woman. The dominant cultural style of femininity shifted from the modesty, refinement, curves, reserve, and ladylike ideals of the nineteenth century to the vivacious exuberance, cheerfulness and childlike physiques of the 1920s. The crowning of the first Miss Denmark in 1926 reflects both national and international shifts in standards of beauty, with youthful and slender physiques taking preference. These qualities of beauty in the winner, seventeen-year-old Edith Jørgensen, "embodied a new ideal of attractive femininity that had been gaining cultural currency not only in Denmark but also throughout much of the rest of the world for more than a decade" (Søland 21).

These ideals of beauty are ones that inform the construction of Lili Elbe's gender expression. Her childlike traits and feminine ideals are reflective of the time and place in which she shapes her identity. Yet, the expectations Lili places on herself in terms of the traditional domestic role she must play work in opposition to the liberations beginning to be afforded to women at the time in terms of freedom and independence. The fact that Lili feels she cannot marry Claude Lejeune until she has undergone one final operation that might allow her to have children demonstrates her belief that she cannot be a complete woman, or a

suitable wife, until she can give her husband-to-be children from her own womb. The way Lili's desires and needs revolve around the figure of a husband in her future demonstrates the out-dated ideology "that woman only exists for man" (Wollstonecraft 71), an ideology which European feminists as early as the late eighteenth century have sought to challenge. In shaping her role as a woman to suit patriarchal expectations of femininity, Lili demonstrates a desperate need for social acceptance and belonging. Through conforming to a role of passivity and compliance, she reinforces the problematic ideology that women exist only to please men.

Rachel Carroll, in her chapter "Two Beings/One Body," includes a passage from Lili's diaries which describes Professor Kreutz as her lord and master, and herself as submitting to his will. Carroll asserts that "Lili's identity [in *Man into Woman*] is defined by passivity, compliance, and submission" (*Transgender* 138). Indeed, her urge to submit to the social norms of motherhood and housewife works in contrast to the later achievements of the Women's Liberation Movement, which challenged understandings of women's roles as purely revolving around the domestic sphere and men's needs. Significantly, Lili does not achieve her dreams. Her death brings a closure to the narrative, which provides answers to the prevailing questions it raises – no, she is not allowed to be a 'complete' woman and she cannot triumph over nature by being a post-operative transgender woman who is capable of being impregnated and/or giving birth. Thus, despite Lili's attempts to follow cultural norms of womanhood, she ultimately fails to do so. Her death signals finality, a closing down of all the options available to her, however limited they may be.

Humour, as demonstrated in the case of *Man into Woman*, has the capacity to raise questions and open things up. However, when faced with the decision of what to do with such questions and openings, many trans\* fictions choose to close things down, tidy up narrative threads and answer the questions raised. Some trans\* fictions avoid the possibilities

altogether that humour can provide. Curiously enough, Ebershoff does not employ any moments of humour in his novel. Perhaps it is through a fear of trivialising the history that he is trying to approach seriously and give justice to that Ebershoff gives his readers a naïve and oblivious Lili instead of an anxious yet playful Lili. Indeed, Lili in *The Danish Girl* does not experience self-consciousness quite as much or as intensely as Lili in *Man into Woman* does, suggesting that Ebershoff wants his readers to find Lili as accessible as possible, just as Russo desires Amanda to be understood and liked in *If I Was Your Girl*. Even more importantly than having their characters be sympathetic to the reader, it seems that authors of trans\* fictions tend to share a similar desire—to be seen as respectful, especially when they are cisgender. The lack of humour in many trans\* fictions therefore reflects the constrained narrative frames the authors are working within. It is integral for these authors to play it ‘safe’ when using conventions which are intentionally common, familiar and unchallenging.

Authors of trans\* fictions seem to be trapped by tropes and conventions that become repetitive, that offer narrow, pathologising representations of gender, and that fail to do justice to the queer. This repeated reliance on conformative tropes to do with being seen as a child, having a double identity, being undesired and desireless, having mental health issues and being victimised leads me to ask if these are the only ways it is possible to represent alternative gender in popular genre fiction. Does being trans\* mean you must forge your way back into adulthood? Does being trans\* mean you see yourself and are seen by others as two distinct people fighting to occupy a single body? Does being trans\* mean you can only either be fetishised or desexualised? Does being trans\* mean you must have depression or anxiety and be a victim or a target? Sometimes, yes. Many of these narratives I have discussed do, indeed, reflect the lives of some people in accurate detail. However, these texts do not account for alternative ways in which it is possible to have and experience gender – they simply repeat the same ideas in different ways. Having analysed and found these

contemporary texts wanting, I now step back in time and turn to fictional representations of trans\* identity from the twentieth-century, to shed further light on how and why these popular genre fiction texts fail to disturb dominant gender ideologies.

## Part Two:

### Queering the Narrative in Armistead Maupin's *Tales of the City*

Where Part One has predominantly analysed popular genre fictions, Part Two is where genre starts to blur. Armistead Maupin's *Tales of the City* is a nine-novel series that celebrates love and diversity within a framework of queer community. *Tales* straddles the boundary between popular genre fiction and literary fiction, both resisting and conforming to certain aspects of genre and convention. Primarily understood as serial fiction, it defies the logic of closure and operates as a form of domestic fiction, a sub-genre of middlebrow fiction. Instead of being centred around women, children and nuclear families, however, its focus is diversely queer and defies heterocentric structures of family. It can be considered a social problem novel, since it is highly engaged with the politics of its time; yet, it does not address these issues in the same serious tone as the social problem novels analysed in Part One. Although invested in emotion, *Tales* also takes risks with sexual and comical content.

Overall, the series reflects a New Left political agenda, in terms of its liberal views about gender, sexuality and queer rights. The setting of San Francisco emphasises the series' investment in expanding a trans-positive discourse. This serial narrative includes a large cast of characters with diverse identities whose complex relationships with themselves and each other are explored throughout. Its representations include gay, lesbian, bisexual, heterosexual and transgender characters. First published in 1978 as a regular column in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Tales of the City* begins with the arrival of the heterosexual character Mary Ann Singleton to San Francisco. Mary Ann's unfamiliarity with 'The City' allows the writer to explore San Francisco culture in the late seventies (and beyond). Her friend Michael 'Mouse' Tolliver is also reasonably new to the city, having "escaped a fundamentalist upbringing in Orlando, Florida, by coming to San Francisco and coming out of the closet" (Kellerman 41).

It is through the characters of Michael and Mary Ann that the series' two central transgender characters are introduced to the narrative.

Anna Madrigal and Jake Greenleaf play important roles in subverting many of the problematic tropes that dominate discourse about queer gender. Their identities and journeys are represented with more complexity than the characters of contemporary popular trans\* fictions; yet, there are also limitations. In many of the texts examined in Part One, the narratives often rely on dark themes; problematic tropes including double identity, victimisation and infantilisation; and simplistic notions of rebirth and coming of age. These texts also fail to give their queer characters a sexual life. Anna and Jake resist pathologising tropes such as the trans\* person as victimised and undesired/desireless. They are not caught between a double identity, as fighting a battle between a 'true' self and a 'false' self. Where the narratives examined in Part One focus on the marginalisation and isolation of queer characters—which leads to the shaping of bodies to 'fit' with social expectations of congruence and conformity—Maupin's tale is one that emphasises the importance of community. The series predominantly establishes messages of belonging for the series' queer characters – both within the queer hub of San Francisco and within the family that Anna builds at Barbary Lane. Yet, despite these messages of inclusion, the novel presents Jake as someone who experiences feelings of being out of place, especially within the spaces allocated for queer difference. Jake is someone who feels 'other' amongst queer people, alienated amidst the group of people one might expect to feel the most sense of belonging with.

For many of the queer characters in Maupin's series, San Francisco is a place for new beginnings, rebirth and coming out of the closet. San Francisco plays a significant role in shaping a new heritage for its queer characters – one that involves presenting inclusivity and diversity as the norm, redefining conventional understandings of family, and subverting the

status quo. Maupin, as a gay man living in the queer community of San Francisco, thus presents a queer homosexual political agenda – his aim is to make gayness, and the queer, visible, to highlight the value of difference and critique societal preoccupations with the rejection, regulation and policing of gender and sexual diversity. Although Maupin offers more complex answers to questions of identity and gender, the series still adopts some of the same representational tropes examined in Part One in problematic ways. This part of the thesis is particularly interested in how Maupin disrupts hegemonic understandings of gender but also identifies and questions the ways in which *Tales* fails to subvert dominant gender ideologies.

This second part of the thesis begins by situating the series within the context of the author's agenda – that is, Maupin's role as a gay man in presenting both a homonormative political agenda and a wider queer political agenda. It then offers an overview of the role of serial fiction in relation to secrecy, narrative and language, before providing an analysis of how the series adopts different narratives of identity. It then moves on to explore how the series uses and subverts dark themes and attempts to reposition readers' understandings of sex and desire.

#### **Authorial Agenda: Subversion and Humour**

Armistead Maupin expresses a clear agenda in terms of his authorly desire – as a gay writer who belongs to the queer community and culture of San Francisco, his positionality is at the forefront of homosexual politics. Critics such as Robert Kellerman, Robyn Warhol and Werner Einstadter and Karen Sinclair, when reviewing Maupin's work, assess the extent to which he challenges heteronormative expectations to do with both narrative and identity. Maupin writes for a broad and general readership, meaning that he is at once offering representations that will speak to much of his queer readership while attempting to

reconfigure the expectations of the series' heterosexual, cisgender readership. *Tales*, as a serial narrative, defies the logic of closure, subverts the way in which characters mature and come of age, defies heteronormative ideologies concerning monogamous, heterosexual relationships and the structure of families, and repositions readerly understandings of queer possibility to promote queer rights and acceptance. The series tackles the complexities of HIV in the lives of its gay and straight cisgender male characters, offering sympathetic representations of the harsh realities of the AIDS crisis. Although the major focus of the series concerns its homosexual (and predominantly male) characters, its representations of transgender characters are of particular interest to this thesis, especially the way these characters resist some conventional tropes for narrating transgender identity. The arguments that follow will therefore draw on scholarship that is invested in questions of homosexuality; however, they will focus predominantly on extending scholarly thought to include the transgender as a part of the wider queer umbrella.

Armistead Maupin's homosexual agenda is partially achieved through the way he uses humour and subverts dark themes such as violence and abuse. In many contemporary examples of popular trans\* fiction, the central character often becomes a victim of bullying or abuse, especially within school settings for young adult fiction. This trope is subverted in *Tales of the City* when Jon asks Michael what he was like in high school. Michael tells him,

[a]ll I ever did in high school was tool around with the guys and a six-pack of Bud, looking for heterosexuals to beat up . . . You can't miss 'em. They walk funny and carry their books against their hips. (*Tales* 102)

Michael's description of his high school shenanigans has a satirical function in the series. Michael's hypermasculine role of bullying, rebelling by drinking beer and 'tooling' around with the guys subverts the heteronormative assumption that the queer character will be on the

receiving end of said bullying. Furthermore, Michael's description of heterosexuals as walking funny and carrying their books against their hips is such a blatant generalisation that it draws the reader's attention to the kinds of generalisations that are made about people who are queer.

This message about the futility of generalisations is repeated in different ways throughout the series. For instance, Ned, the original owner of the Nursery that Michael buys and renames 'Plant Parenthood,' tells Michael that "[t]here are two hundred thousand faggots in this town. If you generalize about them, you're no better than the Moral Majority" (Maupin, *Further Tales* 108). This statement is an overt example of the way in which Maupin is attempting to encourage pro-queer attitudes amongst his readers. As Einstadter and Sinclair argue, "Maupin manages to convey the more important subtextual message that the existing scope of sexual orientation is not to be exposed to judgment" (685). This argument also applies to the novels' treatment of gender identity, since Anna and Jake are both represented in a positive light.

Where many contemporary trans\* fictions use humour either sparingly or not at all, Maupin indulges in regular use of humour for the purposes of satire, subversion and queering the narrative. Anna's character is one that regularly indulges in humour. In addition to making jokes about her age—she calls herself "[a]n old cheese" (Maupin, *Further Tales* 11), "a cranky old hen" (217) and "an anthropological exhibit" (Maupin, *Days* 7)—Anna also makes playful jokes about her status as a transgender woman: "I was quite taken with him when I was a young . . . whatever" (Maupin, *Further Tales* 41; ellipses in original). Anna's ability to laugh at herself contributes to the reader's idea of her as someone who does not take herself too seriously. In this way, she differs from many trans\* characters in contemporary popular representations, who tend to be both serious and treated in a serious way. Anna is a reminder that gender is something that can be played with. Her reference to herself as a

young ‘whatever’ reveals the layers at work in her identity. As a young person, she is not just a girl trapped in a boy’s body (although she does use wrong-body discourse to this effect) but she is also someone who sees herself as encompassing both male and female identities as well as an androgynous space. Anna is someone who disrupts binary gender stereotypes. She subverts expectations for masculinity and femininity, thus challenging conventional expectations of what it means to be a gendered individual in society.

Although Maupin’s agenda is predominantly concerned with homosexual representation, this is situated within the wider context of the queer. Thus, Maupin sets out to queer the narrative in multiple ways, even through the series’ straight characters. Brian, who is described by Mona as a womaniser (*Tales* 132), meets a woman at a spa who assumes that Brian is gay and insists that “[a]ll of us are a little homosexual, Brian. You must not be in touch with your body” (*Tales* 100). The series regularly takes advantage of opportunities such as this one to queer the narrative. Mary Ann and Michael are best friends throughout the series; Michael and Brian become close friends and are even confused to be a couple; and Mary Ann and Brian start dating in the third novel, *Further Tales of the City*. In a moment of whimsy,

Mary Ann leaned over and kissed him [Michael] on the cheek . . . Then she turned to her other side and kissed Brian lightly on the mouth. Michael completed the circle by blowing a kiss to Brian. Smiling contentedly, Mrs. Madrigal watched the ritual like a doting matchmaker, hands clasped under her chin. “You know,” she said. “You three are my favourite couple.” (Maupin, *Further Tales* 41)

This idea of Michael, Brian and Mary Ann as a three-person couple (a thuple) is repeated in the series—alongside the reoccurrence of threesomes—to challenge monogamous heterocentric models of marriage and relationship and to undermine closure and convention.

Maupin's priority is to make his gay characters as accessible and likeable as possible to his audience while challenging reader expectations about what it means to be gay. Beyond his homosexual agenda, Maupin is also attempting to make the narrative as queer as possible. Indeed, a large part of what makes the *Tales of the City* series work so well as a queer text is the variety of identities it incorporates. Arguably, the transgender characters have the most potential in terms of contributing to the queering of this narrative. Jake Greenleaf and Anna Madrigal both experience journeys that explore what it means not only to live in their assumed identity but to embrace a gender that encompasses both sides of the gender binary as well as a space in between this dichotomy.

## Chapter 5:

### Secrecy, Narrative and Language in Serialised Domestic Fiction

*Tales of the City*, as a series, operates as a social satire that aims to disturb and unsettle reader expectations. A great deal of this unsettling is achieved through the series' use of humour and its farcical plot. The series is provocative, at times radical and often indulges in liberties with language, plot and narrative (such as narrative perspective, flashback and the construction of character backstory). This chapter begins with the role of serial fiction, narrative and language before moving on to analyse how the queer is represented in *Tales* in relation to issues of passing, secrecy and duplicity.

#### Serial Fiction: Narrative and Language

Robyn Warhol, in her article "Making 'Gay' and 'Lesbian' into Household Words," explains three significant features of serial fiction that operate in *Tales of the City*. The first is the defiance of the 'marriage plot,' which, due to the structurally mandated impulse of serialised fiction to defer ending indefinitely, is often undermined by proving possibilities of closure to be provisional or temporary (Warhol 382). The second feature is to do with the way "[s]erial fiction infiltrates domestic space, blurring the boundaries between 'public' and 'private' discourse" (Warhol 382-3; italics in original). The third feature is about how "[s]erial form interacts with events in 'real time'" (Warhol 383; italics in original) and comments on significant historical changes that happen during the time of composition. *Tales of the City* "has the potential to subvert dominant ideologies of sexuality" (Warhol 383) because of the way it "capitalizes on all three of these conventions of serial form not only to enlist its audience's readerly devotion . . . but also to restructure readers' attitudes toward sexuality, and particularly toward what might be called 'sexual diversity'" (383). In making this argument, Warhol draws on the work of Judith Roof in *Come As You Are*, explaining that "Roof has argued that there is something intrinsically straight, something essentially

heteronormative about narrative—all narrative, any narrative that comes (as most narratives usually do) to closure” (383).

For Roof, narrative “as an organising structure . . . plays a large part in the stubborn return of a particularly heterosexual normativity” (Roof xxix). It therefore follows

that the only way narratives could reflect and reinforce the pleasures of alternative sexualities would be for them to employ radical innovations in their discursive forms, not just to offer new or different subject matter for stories that follow the same old established patterns of closure. (Warhol 384)

Indeed, radical innovation is possible with serial form since “the story never really comes to an end; the closure is always momentary” (Warhol 385). If closure and narrative are inherently patriarchal, the queer can articulate itself by resisting these conventions. Luce Irigaray, in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, comments on the power of discourse, arguing that “this domination of the philosophic logos stems in large part from its power to *reduce all others to the economy of the Same*” (Irigaray 74; italics in original). Irigaray thus asks, “how can women analyze their own exploitation, inscribe their own demands, within an order prescribed by the masculine?” (Irigaray 81). Similarly, how can the queer—specifically the transgender—articulate itself through a system of language that is inherently patriarchal and heterocentric?

Irigaray argues that

[w]omen’s social inferiority is reinforced and complicated by the fact that woman does not have access to language, except through recourse to ‘masculine’ systems of representation which disappropriate her from her relation to herself and to other

women. The ‘feminine’ is never to be identified except by and for the masculine.

(Irigaray 85)

This social inferiority is shared by those who are queer, since dominant hegemonic systems aim to repress difference and reinforce the patriarchal status quo. If this is the case, is the transgender and the queer—much like the feminine—only identified by and for the masculine? If one examines the texts analysed in Part One of the thesis, it is possible to argue that these narratives identify the queer according to terms and conventions dictated by patriarchal models. Indeed, the way that the sexuality of trans\* characters is stifled in many of these texts reflects a heterocentric fear of difference in terms of pleasure and desire. In fact, in *Symptoms of Being Human*, Riley’s euphemism about a plane landing in a hangar and then repeatedly taking off and landing again reinforces the masculine heteronormative value placed on penetration as the ultimate form of pleasure and connection between two humans. As Luce Irigaray demonstrates, pleasure—especially feminine pleasure—is far more complex than Freud would have everyone believe.

Irigaray therefore insists that

the truth of the truth about female sexuality is restated even more rigorously when psychoanalysis takes *discourse* itself as the object of its investigations. Here, anatomy is no longer available to serve, to however limited an extent, as proof-alibi for the real difference between the sexes. The sexes are now defined only as they are determined in and through language. Whose laws, it must not be forgotten, have been prescribed by male subjects for centuries. (Irigaray 87)

If language has the power to define sexes and genders, particular attention must therefore be paid to this language. Binary language structures, especially, require close critique. In positioning Anna Madrigal not as a mother or a father to Mona but as a parent, Maupin’s

series opens space to explore alternative means of expressing family roles in relation to gender. As with the case of pronouns, the English language is constrained by the terms available to describe family relationships. Words such as ‘mother’ and ‘father,’ ‘son’ and ‘daughter,’ ‘niece and nephew’ and ‘uncle and aunty’ reinforce binary logic in their structuring of heterocentric family dynamics. Although the terms ‘parent’ and ‘child’ offer nongendered alternatives to these dominant structures, there does not exist, in the English vernacular, words that refer to aunts, uncles, nieces and nephews without establishing these family roles within the context of binary gender. It is possible to imagine how some imaginative reconfiguration of such language could benefit understandings of queer genders.

Warhol argues that *Tales of the City* “is as overtly queer in its content as I would argue it is implicitly queer in its deployment of serial form” (385). Yet, the series has also been critiqued for its treatment of women:

males (no matter which sexual preference they express) are given a more indulgent characterization. The situational contexts in which women are placed, while often amusing and humorous, seem more contrived and the characterization less sympathetically drawn than that of males. (Einstadter and Sinclair 688)

This may be the case in some instances but it must not be forgotten that many of these characters are being mocked for their upper-class privilege, not their femininity. Virginia Woolf, in *A Room of One’s Own*, expresses the need for more women to contribute to and expand on women’s discourse, to find ways of challenging the dominant masculine mode of storytelling and writing, and to explore what is important to women. It therefore stands, given the number of safe representations of queer gender available in the contemporary popular fiction market, that more queer people—especially transgender, genderqueer, genderfluid and nonbinary folks—take an active role in shaping and contributing to discourse about what it

means to be queer. Part of the value of Maupin's contribution to popular culture and the literary world is that he belongs under the broad umbrella of the queer. Even though he is cisgender, his perspective as a gay man helps to queer the narrative of the *Tales* series and explore queer gender in a way that resists heteronormative logic and societal preoccupations with conformative gender.

Robyn Warhol argues that "*Tales of the City* takes the antiheterocentric impulse of serial fiction to its most extreme manifestation: the queer plot that reconfigures families, couples, and coupling in antitraditional and unpredictable patterns" (386). This is evident throughout the series in its redefinition of family as something chosen ('logical,' according to Anna, rather than biological). This message is important, especially in the way it opens space to queer people who might have been cast from their biological families. The way the series reconfigures couples and coupling also achieves an important queering of the narrative, including threesomes and playful jokes about three-way relationships as well as resisting the common marriage plot that dominates so much of popular fiction.

### Passing, Secrecy and Duplicity

In the examples of the fiction explored in Part One, the trans\* characters grapple with and often attempt to conceal the 'secret' of their identity. For many of these characters, secrecy is related closely with a need to 'pass' – to be seen as a congruent woman or man rather than as a trans\* person or a queer person. The concept of 'passing' is problematic because it is situated within a paradigm of fear and social conformity. Gender passing usually involves following socially acceptable models of femininity and masculinity, meaning that it is a hostile society that demands the secret of a person's queer gender to be concealed, since it does not fit with hegemonic standards of gender. If this gender deviance is not concealed, it is subsequently treated with punitive and regulatory action, usually in the form of prejudice and

abuse. Many contemporary popular fictions representing characters with queer gender identities demonstrate a concerning preoccupation with the need to ‘pass’ in society and keep the ‘secret’ of their identities concealed. Jake’s preference to pass in heteronormative, cisgendered society—as Chapter 7 explores—reflects a fear of being identified for his queer difference. This preoccupation contributes to and perpetuates the marginalisation and ostracisation of people with queer gender identities. Yet, how is it possible to avoid these oppressive outcomes when fiction itself relies so heavily on the concealment and revelation of secrets?

Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle suggest that “[i]t is precisely because there are things that remain hidden from us, and because we want to know what these things are, that we continue to read” (“Secret” 317). Secrecy is a convention heavily relied upon across multiple genres in fiction. It is not secrecy itself that is problematic but the way in which it is handled. Secrecy has become a convenient and sensationalistic way of representing queer gender identities in many examples of contemporary fiction, offering a safe and easy means of narrating a story full of conflict and drama. Furthermore, the concealment of a ‘secret’ identity lends itself to readings of the trans\* character as duplicitous. These representations, which have “circulated widely across popular culture” (Pini et al. 61), portray trans\* people as engaging in “dishonesty and fraud” (Halberstam, *Telling* 62), providing textual opportunities to elaborate on the ways the queer has ‘wronged’ the ostensibly innocent and unassuming straight, cisgender characters (see, for instance, Brian Katcher’s 2009 novel *Almost Perfect* and Charity Norman’s *The Secret Life of Luke Livingstone*). In many coming-of-age narratives, the trans\* identity is a secret already known by the reader but is usually revealed to other characters by someone other than the trans\* individual. Where coming out oneself can trigger a process of rebirth and renewal, being outed by someone else usually triggers punishment. The punitive consequences of being outed reveal the dangers of the

wider sociocultural context inhabited by the characters – one that seeks to shut down queer difference and reinforce patriarchal values. The revelation of the secret therefore provides opportunities for the trans\* character to be victimised, stigmatised and othered. Armistead Maupin's *Tales of the City* series, however, handles these issues differently.

One of the significant differences between how secrecy operates in Maupin's texts compared with contemporary examples of trans\* representation is that *Tales* is a nine-novel series and the texts analysed in Part One are all stand-alone novels. Consequently, the shape of serial fiction allows for a more complex web of concealment and a slower revelation of secrets, which is particularly relevant with how Jake negotiates the closet in relation to meeting potential partners. Just like stand-alone texts, the *Tales* series relies on the commercial imperative of concealing and revealing secrets but has more space to draw out the complications of these secrets. As Robyn Warhol demonstrates (382-3), the role of secrecy in serial fiction occupies a complex role, especially in the way serial fiction functions similarly to day-time soap opera, which is expected to have multiple twists and turns in the narrative, with revelation upon revelation challenging the consumer's expectations about both character and plot. Furthermore, serial fiction maintains a wider political agenda in terms of challenging established conventions of narrative and form. It seeks to break down binaries, disrupt heteronormative logic and comment on topical social subjects. Unlike the social problem novel, which often takes advantage of topical subjects to construct an engaging narrative, *Tales* functions as a social satire, aiming to subvert expectations and challenge the status quo.

Secrecy in the *Tales of the City* series operates differently in terms of how it handles queer gender identities. For instance, the series refuses to use the secrecy of a character's identity as a sensational hook to draw in the reader. It also resists getting caught up in the drama of trying to 'pass' to conceal the secret of one's identity. However, there is textual

evidence that reveals Jake's need to pass. In *Mary Ann in Autumn*, Jake becomes preoccupied with "how to pee believably" (34). His solution is an ingenuitive contraption made from a "Freshette" – a "funnel-and-tube urination device" (35), which is threaded through a packer. This device gives Jake "something believable to pull out of his fly when privacy was impossible" (35). What Jake hopes others will 'believe' is that he is a congruent, cisgender man. Jake's decision to 'pass' in this way is a safe one that conceals his incongruence. Moreover, it renders the queer invisible and perpetuates the idea that being openly trans\* in society—even in queer capitals like San Francisco—is unacceptable. Fortunately, this problematic need to pass is balanced out by the agency Anna is granted in terms of coming out.

Anna's identity is concealed not only from the other characters but also from the reader, meaning that her story is not so much about the fear of being outed as it is about who she is and how she builds her family. The reader is presented with 'clues' to her past – such as her time in Denmark (*Tales* 184) and textual references to her daughter Mona as the only one to know "Mrs Madrigal's secret" (*More Tales* 16). Unlike the trope of being outed in many contemporary trans\* fictions, Anna is afforded the agency to come out herself. Moreover, instead of being accused of duplicity, she is met with acceptance and understanding. She can come out—reveal her secret—because she has established an environment of queer community and belonging in which to safely do so. Even though neither Anna nor Jake is accused of being duplicitous by other characters, some scholars—particularly—Einstadter and Sinclair—read into the duplicitous appearances of the wider cast of characters in the *Tales* series.

Warhol comments on the role of secrecy in serial form and day time soap opera, arguing that *Tales of the City* functions in a similar way to daytime soaps insofar that it queers heterocentric family configurations, subverting "the structure of the nuclear family by

doubling and trebling people's relationships to one another" (387). After establishing the premise that Mrs Madrigal's tenants at 28 Barbary Lane are like children to her, Warhol explains that

one of the tenants—Mona—*really* is a daughter of Anna Madrigal's, but this is a secret, unknown to the narrative audience or to any of the characters other than Anna. . . . Here, though, the revelation has a twist that 'queers' the trope: when the secret comes out (in *More Tales of the City*, the second volume), we learn that though Mona is Anna Madrigal's child, Anna is not Mona's mother; she is her father, having undergone a transsexual operation after Mona's birth. This hilarious disruption of readerly expectations sets a pattern for queering the idea of what a 'real' family might be, or how family members might 'really' be related. (Warhol 387-8; italics in original)

This idea of 'queering' family is central to *Tales of the City*, proving that family is not necessarily about blood but about personal connections. Family is not predetermined but can instead be chosen and made. The subversion of heterocentric family structure is achieved, in part, through the doubling and trebling of characters' relationships with one another. Yet, Warhol's argument, similarly to that of Einstadter and Sinclair (see below), fails to acknowledge the final twist that trebles Mona's relationship with Anna Madrigal.

In their review of the first six novels in the *Tales* series, Einstadter and Sinclair likewise identify that "Mrs. Madrigal is not a stranger to Mona but her parent. The twist is that she is not Mona's mother, but her father" (687). They argue that a major motif in the series is that "people are not what they seem", which allows Maupin to "expose the reader's stereotypes and presuppositions" (687). Yet, Einstadter and Sinclair take this further, insisting on the deceptive quality of the series' characters:

one character is white posing as black; another is unfaithful pretending to be faithful, gay posing as straight; while others wear masks that obscure their true natures, even from themselves. Sex-change operations, skin-changing drugs, mind-altering substances confuse perceptions, distorting the field in which the actors perform and forcing the reader to penetrate veneers. (687)

Einstadter and Sinclair conclude that “[w]hile facades may make life easier, they also complicate. This makes for a funny plot, but by the last in the series, *Sure of You*, Maupin's tone is both serious and angry. Appearances now dupe and deceive” (687). Although these themes of deception and distortion take place in the novels, they operate within a wider, more complex argument.

What Warhol and Einstadter and Sinclair fail to recognise is that Mona, after being revealed as Mrs Madrigal's daughter, is then revealed to have been fathered by “an oversexed plumber” (258) who Anna's ex-wife Betty Ramsey had slept with. *Tales* is therefore not just a series about how appearances can deceive; it is also a story about how deceitful appearances themselves can not only be deceived but also overcome. The effect of this cyclical duplicity on the reader is that one learns not to assume anything from the story or any of its characters – for as soon as one assumes something, this assumption is soon made redundant by another twist or turn in the plot or the characters' relationships. Furthermore, in establishing these layers of ‘façade,’ Maupin grants his characters space to explore their identities. Despite Einstadter and Sinclair's insistence on the pretence and posing of various characters, many of these characters are not setting out to intentionally deceive or hurt others – they are just getting on with their lives and, in some cases, relying on deception as a form of survival in a society that can often be hostile to difference. Furthermore, many of these façades reveal the deeper function of the satire at work in Maupin's *Tales of the City*. In this sense, the ‘deceptions’ that operate in *Tales* open a space for questioning the kinds of

identities that are forming behind the appearances these characters maintain. Since no single character possesses knowledge of all the secrets contained within the *Tales of the City* series—but the reader does—the reader is therefore positioned to draw connections between these hidden secrets and build their own conclusions about the characters.

If a character is gay posing as straight, are they exploring a fluid/bi-curious identity or are they forced to ‘pass’ as straight to keep themselves safe? Does a sex-change operation distort one’s perception of their ‘true’ sex or does it reveal more about how these characters view themselves? Is the reader really forced “to penetrate veneers” (Einstadter and Sinclair 687) or should they simply accept the characters’ idiosyncrasies? In large part, the revealing of these so-called ‘truths’ throughout the narratives functions as a means of cushioning the potentially challenging surprise of meeting a queer character who the reader has assumed to be cis and/or straight. All these duplicities—revealing a black woman as white, masking characters from their ‘true natures’ and having gay characters pose as straight—when examined together, hold the potential to allow the reader to forgo their assumptions and question the nature of ‘truth.’ Does it really matter that Mona and Mrs Madrigal are not blood relatives? The answer is both no and yes. No, because blood does not dictate family relationships – as the series sets out to prove and as Anna confirms through her claim of her ‘logical,’ as opposed to biological, family (*Mary Ann* 172). Yes, because the revealing of Anna Madrigal first as Mona’s mother, then as Mona’s father, then as not biologically related to her at all does not change the fact that Anna sees Mona as her daughter and Mona sees her eclectic landlady as a parent. In fact, the complexity of their relationship goes beyond parent and child, landlady and tenant; Mona describes Mrs Madrigal as “[h]er father, her mother, her best friend and her landlady, all rolled into one joyful and loving human being” (*More Tales* 126). The same cannot be said for Anna’s relationship with her own mother, who she greets after many years with “the same cordial, but distant, expression Mrs Madrigal used on

Jehovah's Witnesses" (*More Tales* 146). In this sense, the series suggests that the appearance of biological family should not necessarily be equated with the family one chooses.

Yet, if appearances by nature deceive, how is one to read Anna Madrigal? If Anna is described as having girlish movements when she tucks her legs under her on the sofa (*More Tales* 59), should she be read as a girl? Is she really an older woman 'posing' as someone younger? Or should her spirit be read as younger? If sex change is a form of deception, should Anna be thought of as a man? Her ex-wife Betty thinks so and accuses her of this deception: "I know what you're doing. You're deliberately poisoning her [Mona] against me. You're using her to satisfy some sick maternal urge that will make you feel like a *real* woman" (*More Tales* 254; italics in original). The revelation of Anna's name as an anagram for "a man and a girl" (*More Tales* 284) provides the answer: yes, to all the above. In alignment with Butler's theories of performativity and Baudrillard's ideas about simulation, Anna Madrigal demonstrates that the 'truth,' the 'original'—whatever is being simulated—is no more real than and cannot be separated from what is presented to others. It is in this way that Anna occupies a position of hybridity and multiplicity. Furthermore, Betty's antagonistic role reveals the futility of suspicion when it is divulged that Betty was the one who hired the private detective, Norman Williams, to find out about Anna and her transition. Anna refuses to reward Betty with any answers and does not confide her transition journey. Beyond this visit to Anna Madrigal, Betty is expelled from the narrative and the lives of its central characters, thus jettisoning the disrespectful and prying attitudes that the series sets out to challenge. Indeed, the visit concludes with Betty telling Anna that "You're a *bastard* is what you are" and then Anna getting the final say: "'[p]lease,' smiled Mrs Madrigal. 'Call me a bitch'" (*More Tales* 260; italics in original).

This chapter has explored the role of serial fiction, narrative and language, considering how both form and content contribute to a literary queering in Armistead

Maupin's *Tales of the City* series. This queering occurs on many levels, with expectations concerning family dynamics, marriage and relationships enmeshed within a resistance to closure, a blurring of binaries and a commentary that reflects the changes in LGBTQIA+ culture and politics over the last five decades. These ideas are situated alongside the literary convention of the secret in the *Tales* series to create a complex serial narrative that transcends heteronormative expectations for discourse and challenges hegemonic modes of thought concerning the diversity of sexuality and gender. Maupin adopts secrecy in a way that leads to a questioning of the 'deceitfulness' of appearances; since deceit carries the implication of a binary between falsity and truth—and since this thesis is all about resisting binaries and deconstructing essentialist notions such as 'truth'—it therefore follows that stepping outside this dichotomy allows space to consider the more complex nuances at work in gender identity. The work of Judith Roof, Luce Irigaray and Virginia Woolf—although focusing on how women and the feminine can resist the patriarchal structure of discourse and language—reveals the urgent need for the queer to enter this dialogue. For, it is only through antiheterocentric impulses that hegemonic patriarchal values can be resisted, deconstructed and redefined.

## Chapter 6: Narratives of Identity

At the heart of the many interrelated narratives that make up *Tales of the City* is the transgender, marijuana-growing landlady at 28 Barbary Lane on Russian Hill. Anna Madrigal is first introduced to the narrative as a woman approximately in her fifties but, as the series progresses and Anna ages through the passing decades, the reader is presented with more flashbacks to her younger self. It is not until the end of the second novel in the series, however, that Anna comes out as transgender. The span of Anna's life that is depicted in the novels is significant, since there are very few fictional representations of transgender characters aging across such a wide trajectory. Indeed, Anna has the longest lifespan of a transgender character that I have so far encountered in fiction and the reader learns about her development—both chronologically and retrospectively—in almost every one of her nine decades. What this means for the series is a rich, complex character journey that reflects on transgender experience from multiple life stages and allows room for Anna's values and perspectives to shift and develop in a way that is both organic and reflective of human fluidity. Anna thus occupies a central position concerning the series' messages of androgyny, multiplicity and hybridity. Her beliefs inevitably influence many of the other queer characters in the series, especially those who are like children to her.

It is not until the seventh instalment in the series, *Michael Tolliver Lives*, that the other significant trans character, Jake Greenleaf, is introduced to the narrative. He is presented as a manly bear in his thirties – a 'new' man who is still in the process of becoming. Just as Anna is initially introduced in her affirmed identity and already living in San Francisco, Jake Greenleaf is similarly introduced in his affirmed identity as Michael's new gardening assistant. Significantly, this book is the only one in the series to be narrated in the first person. Where the rest of the series adopts the third person omniscient to offer windows into all the different characters' lives, *Michael Tolliver Lives* is narrated from

Michael's point of view. The fact that Jake is introduced through Michael's perspective reflects a common narrative convention adopted by cisgender authors who need to avoid claiming that they understand what it means to be transgender. This positionality also occurs in Julie Anne Peters's *Luna*, which is narrated from the perspective of Luna's sister. This decision is both a safe one and a problematic one – safe, because the author can achieve a degree of distancing that prevents them from being critiqued for inaccurately representing trans experience. Yet, it is also problematic because it prevents the queer from articulating itself. Just as Laura Mulvey argues that the 'male gaze' objectifies feminine representations in film, positioning a trans character as perceived through the eyes of a cisgender character threatens to impose a heteronormative, cisgender 'gaze' on characters. Having argued that *looking* at a transgender character in this way can be both safe and problematic, Maupin's decision for the most part works in favour of the series' wider queer political agenda by using Michael's perspective to affirm Jake's identity and depict Jake as a character who disrupts the convention of undesirability in contemporary genre fiction representations of trans\* characters.

Jake is first described as “a short, stocky bear of thirty or thereabouts with a trim little beard and soulful gray eyes” (*Michael Tolliver Lives* 45). When he first appears in the narrative, Jake is “in loose khakis with wide suspenders and a flannel shirt. The effect of this mining-camp getup is just as deliberate as Jake's rusticated name. Both were chosen to suggest the strong, earthy, no-nonsense person he intended to become” (*Michael Tolliver Lives* 46). Although providing hints at Jake's transgender status, the reader remains so far unaware that Jake is trans, meaning that his masculinity should be assumed to be 'natural.' He is described as “chuckling manfully” (49) and as presenting a gender expression that comes from a deeper internal sense of masculinity. Jake's character lends a great deal of complexity to the *Tales* series in terms of his role as a sexual being and his overall

development towards a space of hybridity and self-acceptance; yet, he also reinforces problematic and pathologising tropes concerning congruence, completion and anxiety.

Significantly, the *Tales of the City* series distinguishes itself from much fiction (and, indeed, memoir, autobiography and biography) about trans\* characters by beginning with the transgender characters in their affirmed identities, focusing on the lived reality and experience of trans identity rather than the process of transition that so many contemporary popular fiction novelists extrapolate on in their writing. Having said this, the ninth book in the series, *The Days of Anna Madrigal*, details Anna's history as a young boy growing up in a brothel in Winnemucca. This book focuses not only on Anna's process of transition but also on her relationship with Lasko, her early feelings of femininity and the steps that lead to her leaving home. The book contains messages of rebirth and transformation, specifically revolving around the metaphor of the monarch butterfly. Furthermore, although Jake is first introduced to the narrative in his affirmed identity, there is still a sense that he is in the process of becoming. His drive for 'completion' conveys a problematic message similar to the texts analysed in Part One about the value of congruent bodies and conformative gender.

This chapter begins by examining themes of transformation concerning rebirth, renewal and coming of age, analysing how these ideas are given more complexity in the *Tales* series compared with the texts analysed in Part One. A typical narrative arc positions these transformative experiences towards the conclusion of the novel, as the culmination of a series of challenging events that leads to the character conforming to societal expectations of congruent gender. For Luna, in Julie Ann Peters's novel, her coming of age is marked by the leaving of home at the end of the book. Lucia's rebirth and renewal in *The Secret Life of Luke Livingstone* occurs at the conclusion of the novel after receiving surgery and being accepted by her family as a congruent woman. Amanda's coming of age in *If I Was Your Girl* similarly occurs towards the end of her narrative after keeping her transgender status secret and being

outed. The transgender characters in Maupin's *Tales of the City* series experience rebirth, renewal and coming of age in different ways – sometimes, in alignment with conventions of contemporary trans\* fictions but also in ways that resist these tropes. Jake and Anna can be seen to come of age at multiple points throughout the series – not just at the conclusion of a novel or at the end of the series. One of the ways in which these characters experience rebirth and renewal is by moving to San Francisco, where the established queer community offers the space to live openly in their affirmed identities. Yet, ideas of 'completion' and congruence also play a significant role in shaping Jake's and Anna's lives and their processes of identity.

Many trans\* characters in contemporary popular genre fiction express the need for completion – whether that be through surgery or by 'passing' in their affirmed gender. Likewise, many contemporary trans\* fictions rely on the trope of secrecy. Elizabeth Reis's article "Transgender Identity at a Crossroads" (2014) offers a close reading of a short story published anonymously in an 1857 New York literary magazine called the *Knickerbocker*. "The Man Who Thought Himself a Woman" follows the plight of Japhet Colbones and conveys themes of deceit and secrecy, which Reis argues are characteristic of earlier portrayals of atypical gender presentation. Yet, these characteristics are just as prevalent in contemporary popular genre representations of queer gender. Themes of concealment and betrayal are not only prevalent in these fictions but also integral to their publication, since this sensationalism is a driving factor in the book market. Inevitably, where a character's identity is concealed, that person must either come out or be outed. Many authors take advantage of the decloseting of their trans\* characters to add drama and conflict to the narrative. Maupin's *Tales* series stands in contrast to these conventions by creating a commentary about and challenging moments when trans characters do not choose to be outed. Anna remains in charge of who knows about her transgender status and when she chooses to tell others about

it. As for the idea of ‘completion,’ Anna and Jake simultaneously resist and conform to societal expectations of congruence. This multiplicity contributes to the series’ complexity, especially in terms of the value the narrative places on ideas of hybridity.

This chapter concludes by examining themes of multiplicity, hybridity and androgyny in the *Tales* series in relation to tropes concerning double identity in contemporary fictional narratives. Texts such as *The Danish Girl* and *The Secret Life of Luke Livingstone* position their trans protagonists as experiencing an internal conflict between their male self and their female self, with one identity fighting to take over the other. In these texts, the transwomen insist on eradicating all evidence of their former male selves, likening their male selves to being dead. In contrast to this language of violence and death regarding the male self as other, the transgender characters in the *Tales* series both arrive at a space of all-encompassing gender and self-acceptance in which they embrace both the feminine and masculine aspects of their identities and celebrate a space of androgyny and hybridity.

### Rebirth, Renewal and Coming of Age

Many of the characters in the *Tales* series experience rebirth and renewal by coming to the city. San Francisco represents the opportunity for a fresh start, a place where anyone will be accepted regardless of their identity. It is a place of escape from biological families with whom characters feel no sense of belonging. For Jake, San Francisco is where he moves to receive his double mastectomy and, later, his hysterectomy, which are both fundamental surgeries that contribute to his renewal and ‘completion.’ When Michael and Jake first meet, Jake gives Michael his business card, which declares him to be a “New Man” (*Michael Tolliver Lives* 60). Jake’s newness as a man can be attributed to the fact that he has recently started presenting as one. This newness, while hinting at Jake’s process of transition also conveys notions of rebirth.

Since very little of Jake's past life outside of San Francisco is included in the series, the reader is left to guess what kind of upbringing he had. Perhaps he was not accepted by his family in Tulsa; perhaps he had not even come out to his family. If Jake was not accepted by his biological family, his arrival in San Francisco marks the potential that Jake will fit in with the queer community and be accepted for who he is. Yet, Jake finds that, even in the "pansexual wonderland of San Francisco" (*Michael Tolliver Lives* 33), he does not fit in with the rest of the 'queers.' In fact, Jake's comments about space, place and belonging reveal the extent to which he feels alienated even within the queer community. Jake may be a 'new' man but he does not receive a new beginning that liberates him from judgment and prejudice. Jake does not experience the kind of rebirth that one might expect from such an openly queer city. Indeed, it is possible to argue that Jake does not fully become a 'new man'—or 'complete,' as Jake phrases it—until after he receives his hysterectomy. I return to this idea of completion further ahead in this chapter. Here, I interrogate how Anna Madrigal is represented as experiencing rebirth and renewal.

Throughout the *Tales of the City* series, there are two significant moments that can be read as ones of rebirth and renewal for Anna Madrigal. The first example is her gender confirmation surgery, which is both problematic in terms of it being a common trope in transition narratives and subversive in terms of the way it is only included in the narrative by way of Anna telling the story to another character. When Anna comes out to Brian in *More Tales*, she tells him about her life with her ex-wife Betty, using her birthname 'Andy' and the third person to refer to herself:

None of it worked. Not for Andy, anyway. He ended up leaving his wife and child – deserting them – when the child was two years old. For the next fifteen years, he virtually dropped out of sight, drifting from city to city, a miserable, self-pitying creature who had botched his own life and the lives of the people around him. All of

that ended, however, when Andy was forty-four. That was when he picked up the pieces and traveled to Denmark and spent his life savings on a sex change. (*More Tales* 92)

The way Anna narrates her story positions her gender confirmation surgery as the inevitable end to one life and beginning of another. That she calls her former self a “miserable, self-pitying creature” who ruins peoples’ lives stands in stark contrast to the Anna Madrigal that the reader knows – one who is whimsical, self-confident, takes pleasure in life and plays a pivotal nurturing role in the lives of her chosen family. Undergoing surgical transition is a vital aspect of Anna’s journey to self-fulfilment. It is a way to escape the man she could never be and an opportunity to start over as the all-encompassing woman/girl she always knew she was. Thus, at forty-four years of age, Anna Madrigal starts her ‘new’ life as a transgender woman in San Francisco and can put her past behind her, reconcile with her daughter and build a new family of her own. It is approximately ten years later when the reader first meets Anna. She is introduced to the narrative in her ‘reborn’ identity, which works to confirm her perception of surgery for herself as something life changing and affirming.

The second example of rebirth and renewal for Anna in the *Tales* series occurs when Anna experiences a flashback at the very end of the ninth novel of leaving home as a young boy. This moment is especially complex within the frame of the series, since it simultaneously resists closure and draws the entire story back in a full circle to the idea of new beginnings at its conclusion. In the second-to-last chapter of *The Days of Anna Madrigal*, which is conveniently titled “No Tidying Up,” Anna insists that Brian, who is terrified that Anna might die at any moment, must not try to tidy things up: “[t]here’s no tidying up to be done . . . with the possible exception of this hat” (*Days* 328-9). As Kellerman identifies, “Anna’s impending death is a central issue of the novel” (Kellerman 52), which is

unsurprising given that Anna is 92 years old by the final instalment in the series. Her mortality is of significant concern to her family and, in the last pages of the book, Brian demonstrates concern that the whole family will not be there in what might potentially be her last moments. In the final chapter, Anna Madrigal takes a ride in the monarch butterfly art car that Jake, Amos and Sergeant Lisa have built for her. The art car is designed to commemorate Anna as a “Transgender Pioneer” (*Days* 107) and is intended to symbolise transformation.

When Anna first sees the art car, she has no idea that it is intended for her but explains the monarch butterfly’s significance to Brian and Wren, speaking of the monarch’s migratory patterns and short lifespans:

“They don’t need their elders at all. It’s a miraculous thing.” .... “They have two months,” said Anna. “That’s it. But some part of them must know that they’re part of this endless continuum, this . . . community after death. And even if they *don’t* know, *we* know, and that itself takes your breath away.” (*Days* 316-7)

The monarch symbolises an endless cycle of transformation, rejuvenation and continuity. The rarity of the monarch’s migration patterns reflects a similar rarity in Anna, who Michael describes “as the rarest of birds” (*Michael Tolliver Lives* 63). If Anna is akin to a monarch, she too is positioned as a figure of royalty in the queer community, which is clear through the reverence held towards her by the Burners at Trans Bay when they cheer for her and call her name as she rides in the art car. Anna is a monarch, a matriarch of her own family, establishing beliefs and instincts for each new generation to carry by way of a legacy – much as the monarch butterfly continues its own lifecycle. Anna’s influence on her family is clear throughout the series, especially in terms of her ideas about gender hybridity and multiplicity. Shawna, for instance, comments on why she loves going to visit Jake and Anna: “because both these singular souls, by their very existence, challenged Shawna’s comfortable

assumptions about what it meant to be male or female. They compelled her, if only temporarily, to live in the genderless neutrality of the human heart” (*Mary Ann in Autumn* 224).

Anna has shared the legacy of her transformation from caterpillar to butterfly and, finally, in the last lines of the concluding novel, all of this symbolism surrounding rebirth and renewal transports Anna back in memory to the day she departed from her childhood home in Winnemucca – the day she left her mother-figure Margaret behind (because Anna, too, has no need to rely on her elders) to start a new life for herself. Kellerman argues that

[t]he final line, “Anna couldn’t hear the rest, but she knew she would have to learn her own lessons now. There was a city waiting for her” (*Days* 270), is ambiguous. Does it refer to the San Francisco that Andy would go to or to the city that is part of the “community after death” that Anna will go to? Both readings are and should be plausible; fittingly, Maupin ends his nine-novel serial narrative with a sentence that serves as a door, both open and closed simultaneously. (Kellerman 52)

Indeed, both readings are plausible and one should not be sacrificed for the sake of the other, especially given the series’ themes of multiplicity. It is in this way that *The Days of Anna Madrigal* both resists closure and incorporates a cyclical continuity that marks the end of the novel not so much as a narrative that has concluded but as a narrative that invites new beginnings. Anna’s departure from the home of her youth can be seen as a coming-of-age moment, in which she has relinquished the need to rely on her elders and has begun to forge her own way in the world. That Anna’s first coming-of-age moment occurs at the very end of the last novel in the series is appropriate; however, this is not the only moment in the series in which Anna—or other characters—come of age. Furthermore, it is Anna’s influence on her

‘logical’ family members that fosters a coming of age in others, especially Michael, Brian, Mary Ann and Jake.

Throughout the series, the residents of Barbary Lane come of age when they leave Russian Hill: “the boarding house does function as sort of a way station for singles on their way to maturity—as specifically defined by being in a more or less permanent relationship” (Kellerman 47). If the tenants at number 28 are to be seen as Anna Madrigal’s children, then this coming of age when they leave home is a natural process, with Anna positioned as the maternal figurehead who influences the maturation process of her family members. Yet, as Kellerman identifies, this process of maturation and moving out is often accompanied by a necessary coupling up – most of the characters move into their own domestic coupledness when they leave the Lane. The boarding house at Barbary Lane can be seen as a kind of nest from which Anna’s children fly when they are ready to start new families and/or lives of their own. Michael and Thack move in together when they become a couple and Brian and Mary Ann leave Barbary Lane once they adopt Shawna. Even though these relationships do not endure, while Anna still owns the house on Russian hill, her children all continue to return home to her and the Lane.

The connection that Anna’s family have with both her and the home they all used to share demonstrates the impact Anna has on their lives. The visits that different characters make to the lane after they have moved out are characterised by a nostalgia for the space that was once theirs but can never be theirs again. Once these characters leave Barbary Lane, the narrative conveys the sense that it is a home (or womb) to which they can never return fully, especially once it is sold. Even Anna eventually vacates Barbary Lane, electing to sell the property in the eighteen-year space between the sixth and seventh novels. Anna’s migration from Russian Hill can also be considered as a coming of age, since her health and age pose a challenge on her ability to ascend the towering stairway leading to the boarding house. The

loss of their Barbary Lane home opens a space for the characters to acknowledge that it is not so much the boarding house itself that they yearn for but the motherly care and nurture they received from Anna. However, the characteristics of this care and nurture, too, have changed. Anna no longer occupies the kitchen, preparing food to feed her family. In fact, once she has moved in with Jake, it is he who takes on the nurturing role by making Anna's meals for her. Anna's place in the kitchen changes dramatically after moving away from the Lane, shifting from a space that affirms her role as carer, nurturer and provider to a space of danger in *Mary Ann in Autumn* when Jake finds her lying on the kitchen floor after a fall, unable to get up. Despite her increasing frailty, Anna continues to occupy the role of confidante and advice-giver, taking an active role in challenging her children's thinking and remaining a part of their lives.

One of the pieces of wisdom Anna gives to Jake when he insists that he is a private person is that, "I used to think the same thing about myself. But I was only postponing the chance to be loved as myself" (*Mary Ann* 167). Anna's advice to remain open to love proves beneficial for many of her children and plays an important role in terms of coupledness being established as the key to growing up. By the last book in the series, Michael has found Ben, Brian and Wren are married and Jake is at the beginning of a promising relationship with Amos. Even Shawna finds someone to start a family with. Mary Ann, however, is the one exception to this pattern. Perhaps, in flying the nest too soon, Mary Ann robs herself of the benefit of Anna's influence and thus the ability to come of age. Perhaps Mary Ann's last name, Singleton, defines her place in the world – as someone independent who must forge her way for herself. Therefore, by the last book in the series, where everyone else has achieved a coming of age, Mary Ann has been projected back to a younger self, single and alone, trying to find a place where she fits as she undergoes a new journey to self-discovery and renewal, without the benefit of a mother figure to guide her.

### Coming Out and 'Completion'

The process of coming out is different for each character in the *Tales* series. Most of the characters come out when they arrive in San Francisco, Michael being the most pertinent example at the beginning of the series. However, for characters such as Anna, it takes almost two whole books before she comes out to the rest of her logical family. For Jake, coming out is a necessary step every time he explores a new relationship. Coming out is particularly difficult for Jake because, prior to receiving his hysterectomy, he argues that he is not yet complete, an idea reinforced by Michael and Anna when they talk about Jake. Jake's

drive for completion never waned. In fact, once he'd begun the testosterone, the urgency for the surgery had grown even greater. So he was saving his money, biding his time until the day of deliverance. He was barely past thirty, anyway; the man of his dreams could wait until the plumbing was adjusted. For the moment, at least, *he* was the man of his dreams. (*Mary Ann* 34)

Jake believes he cannot be in a relationship (sexual or romantic) until he is 'complete.' This idea of completion is another problematic idea repeated in many examples of contemporary trans\* fiction and is an issue precisely because it implies that congruence and conformity are the only options for gender. Amanda in *If I Was Your Girl*, is only able to comfortably pursue her relationship with Grant because she has already received gender confirmation surgery and 'passes' as a congruent young woman. It is in this way that the idea of completion can be problematic, since shaping the body to be congruent with one's gender assists in not only conforming to but perpetuating heterocentric values about stereotypical binary gender. In establishing that "genders can neither be true nor false" (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 136), it follows that queer genders should not be pressured by societal impulses to make their bodies 'fit' within a socially prescribed model of 'appropriateness.' Yet, Jake's completion resists

this model insofar as he sees himself as the man of his dreams—which implies a pre-existing sense of fulfilment and self-acceptance—and by refusing to receive a phallus.

Although Jake eventually receives a hysterectomy, he argues that he is against bottom surgery. Jake's reluctance to receive an artificial phallus is one way in which *Tales* resists the themes of congruence that occupy so many contemporary trans\* fictions. His play with language—calling the operation in question an “addadictomy” (add-a-dick-to-me) and marking this moment as one of “tranny humor” (*Michael Tolliver Lives* 61)—queers the narrative and demonstrates that surgery is not the only option for people who are trans\*. Yet, the series includes another form of ‘completion’ for Jake that concerns his gendered performance. According to Michael, “[h]eavy labor was apparently a kind of fulfillment to Jake, a necessary stop on his path to completion—if not completion itself” (*Michael Tolliver Lives* 60-1). Heavy labour can be considered a stereotypically masculine activity – if it gives Jake a sense of fulfilment and completion, as Michael assumes it must, then this must also be read as a form of gender congruence. Jake engages in the kinds of masculine activities that he believes will affirm his identity and suit his role as a man. In this sense, Jake's gender congruence, through his performance, does little to unsettle readerly expectations or push the boundaries of what men's and women's roles are dictated to be in heteronormative society. His refusal to receive a phallus, however, demonstrates that the queer should not always have to align with binary models of gender congruence: it is possible to be a man with a vagina but, ultimately, it is up to the individual to decide what happens with their body.

Significantly, although the series relies on some of the common tropes and conventions analysed in Part One, *Tales of the City* takes these tropes and conventions further, subverting and playing with these ideas in ways that queer the narrative and challenge heteronormative assumptions about congruent, singular identity. For instance, when Brian suggests to Anna that she should grow her nails long, she tells him “I tried that

once . . . growing my nails long . . . I wasn't man enough for it" (*Significant Others* 10; first ellipses in original). Since growing one's nails long is stereotypically considered to be a feminine activity, Anna's statement that she was not man enough to do so at once disrupts this assumption and relocates this stereotype to affirm her feminine identity.

Jake's character, too, achieves a similar queering of the narrative. In *Michael Tolliver Lives*, Michael notes that

[i]t wasn't hard to grasp the alienation of a guy who wants to chase dick without having one himself. Jake had spent most of his life feeling betrayed by his anatomy, but even now that he'd relocated to Queersville he was still too queer for the queers. (*Michael Tolliver Lives* 62)

As Warhol argues, one of the main features of serial fiction is the commentary it provides on political and social issues of the time (383). The idea that Jake is too queer for the queers is one that offers insight to the problematic gender and sexuality politics of the late twentieth century, especially when gay and feminist interests refused to align with trans\* interests. Although these movements stand to gain much by banding together and working towards a common goal of inclusivity, basic human rights and protection under the law, there are many historical instances throughout the last several decades in which gay people, trans\* people and feminists have futilely worked against one another. One example that Susan Stryker draws on in *Transgender History* is the transgender activist Virginia Prince, who "took the leading role in driving wedges between transvestite, transsexual, gay and lesbian, and feminist communities, and she did not envision an inclusive, expansive, progressive, and multi-faceted transgender movement" (55-7). This pattern of exclusion sadly continues today – a contentious and well-known example being J. K. Rowling's alignment with trans-exclusionary radical feminism (Radio New Zealand, par. 5). In the *Tales* series, Jake's queer

gender threatens the binary expectations of other queer people, particularly one gay man at the Lone Star Saloon.

In *Michael Tolliver Lives*, it is not Jake who discloses his transgender status to Michael but a stranger at the urinal who is bent on spreading animosity towards trans\* people rather than demonstrating openness to and acceptance of difference. The stranger at the urinal tells Michael that “[i]f you’re looking to get fucked tonight, you’re looking in the wrong place. . . . That guy you’re talking to . . . is a transman” (*Michael Tolliver Lives* 53). The stranger claims he is “[j]ust doin’ you a favor” (*Michael Tolliver Lives* 53). Michael connects this scenario with “another guy, another total stranger, who once ‘did me a favour’ by tipping me off that a potential playmate was HIV positive. . . . All he’d wanted, anyway, was to see the look on my face. Not unlike the queen in the kilt” (*Michael Tolliver Lives* 53). Both strangers are intent on causing drama and provoking responses from Michael. These scenarios function in the text to warn the reader about the dangers of making assumptions. One of the assumptions that these strangers make is that Michael, as a gay man, is only attracted to penises, which is indeed the case for Michael but is not necessarily true for all gay men or all men who look gay. In assuming that a gay man is only interested in penises, the stranger at the urinal functions as a threat to the queer possibility of the narrative by limiting options of sexual desire to one strict category: either penis or vagina. To his credit, Michael remains open to Jake and does not cut him loose on account of Jake’s identity or genitalia. In fact, Michael signals to the stranger when he leaves the bar with Jake, eliciting a shocked response from the man. Thus, Maupin jettisons the stranger’s binary position about sexual desire and demonstrates that multiplicity and the queer is always a possibility, that sexual desire is not limited to just one sex or just one gender; indeed, sexual desire is a complex product that results from an intersection of romantic interest, physical interest, emotional connection, personality and many other factors. Michael’s interest in Jake and

attraction to his gender expression demonstrate that desire is more complex than body parts alone. In confirming his desire for Jake, Michael affirms Jake's identification as a man. Even without a penis, Jake is still attractive to Michael, which suggests that Jake's masculinity is not based upon his genitalia.

### Double Identity Versus Hybridity

Other problematic devices commonly used in transition narratives include the language of death, wrong-body discourse, double identity and infantilisation. Where many contemporary popular narratives of trans\* identity tend to project the central character back to a younger, more naïve self, *Tales* indulges in ideas of infantilisation through its depiction of Anna as a girl but subverts this by describing her as a man and a girl. *Tales* therefore stands apart from the narratives analysed in Part One insofar as it experiments with more complex ideas of multiplicity and hybridity. When Brian asks if Anna's wife and mother know where she ended up, she tells him "[t]hey must think I'm dead . . . of course, Andy *is*" (*Days* 93). Like many contemporary narratives about trans\* identity, Anna refers to her younger self in the third person, as someone 'other,' separate from herself and dead to both her and the world. This is a commonly used device for narrating transgender identities and can be seen as problematic due to the way it marginalises difference and creates another unhelpful binary that overlooks the complexities of identity. Yet, double identity in much contemporary fiction often relies on a war between two identities combatting one another for occupation of a single body (see *The Danish Girl* and *The Secret Life of Luke Livingstone*). The *Tales* series relies somewhat on the idea of double identity with Anna, in that she separates her current self from her past self as Andy and narrates this story about Andy to Brian in the third person. When Anna 'comes out' to Brian, she tells him, "there was a little boy named Andy Ramsey" (*More Tales* 90) and that "Andy made a startling discovery by the time he reached puberty: There

was nothing about him that felt like a boy” (91). This coming out narrative indulges in the use of wrong body discourse: “he never stopped feeling like a girl, a girl locked up inside a boy’s body” (91). Although Anna speaks of having been born in the wrong body and having “the wrong equipment” (*Days* 176), once she grows up, has her surgery and moves to San Francisco, she embraces an identity that is more about hybridity and multiplicity than it is about a battle between a male self and a female self.

Anna Madrigal is first introduced as “a fiftyish woman in a plum-colored kimono” (*Tales* 15). The series, especially at its onset, frequently refers to Anna’s wardrobe, which is often depicted as exotic and borrows elements from Eastern and Western fashions. Anna is fond of paisley and wears it in the form of a smock or turban. She often wears wool slacks, a cloche, caftans and can regularly be spotted in her plum kimono. Anna’s wardrobe operates as an important tool in the series, lending Anna a sense of elegance as well as an air of hybridity that complements her views about gender identity. When Anna first meets her lover Edgar at the park, she is described as “wearing wool slacks and a paisley smock. She was reading the Bhagavad Gita” (*Tales* 56). The reader’s impression of Anna thus combines the loose flowing hippie clothing of the 1960s with an Eastern twist. Paisley is of Persian origin and has a long, rich history throughout Asia, India and the Middle East, becoming popular in the West from the eighteenth century onwards. The *Bhagavad Gita* is a 700-verse Hindu Scripture that can be dated between the fifth and second centuries BCE. Considered to be one of the most important religious texts in Hinduism, and originally part of the Indian epic *Mahabharata*, the *Gita*

instructs on how one must elevate the mind and soul to look beyond appearances – which fool one into believing in duality and multiplicity – and recognize these are illusions; all humans and aspects of existence are a unified extension of the Divine

which one will recognize once the trappings of illusion have been discarded. (Mark, par. 4)

Despite these central messages of the *Bhagavad Gita*, multiplicity and duality appear to be essential to Anna's identity. Although these values are not revealed until the second novel, Anna's views are first hinted at the onset of *Tales of the City* when Mary Ann asks her prospective landlady if she has any objections to pets. Mrs Madrigal tells her, "Dear . . . I have no objection to anything" (16; ellipses in original). Anna is characterised by an openness to other people and different cultures, beliefs and values. However, it is not until the second novel that the reader learns more about these views and, more importantly, about Anna's transgender status. Towards the end of the second book, the reader learns that Anna's name is an anagram for "a man and a girl" (*More Tales* 284), which has led to the implication that "perhaps the single most important statement that Maupin makes is that androgyny is the ultimate key to being human" (Einstadter and Sinclair 688-9).

Androgyny, multiplicity and hybridity are all ideas that Anna embraces and influences her family with. Operating alongside this all-encompassing identity that Anna presents is her whimsical and subversive capacity to contradict herself. Despite insisting that she has no objection to anything, the reader discovers in the first novel that she does have an unusual objection to cut flowers. Anna tells her lover Edgar that "[l]adies of the evening consider them to be a sign of impending death. Beauty cut down in its prime and all that" (*Tales* 116). Anna's capacity to contradict herself contributes to her enigmatic appeal as a character. The reader never knows quite what to expect from this woman who is both man and woman, boy and girl, old and young. Thankfully, Edgar never gives her flowers; however, this does not prevent the inevitable deaths that will occur throughout the series. Indeed, Anna's objection to cut flowers functions to prepare the reader for the dialogues to come about the relationship between life and death as well as mental health and sickness. As with almost any character in

fiction, Anna is a woman with a past and secrets, and it is not until the final book in the series that the reader is able to learn more about her history. Indeed, it is Wren in the very last instalment of the series who realises, “not for the first time, that Mrs Madrigal enjoyed a good conundrum. Even at this age, with all her cards seemingly on the table, she liked being a woman of mystery” (*Days* 181). Thus, the reader learns to embrace Anna’s mysterious and paradoxical nature.

Anna’s hybrid identity is frequently emphasised throughout the series not only through the anagram ‘a man and a girl’ but also through her interactions with other characters. When Michael and Anna take a ‘breather’ beneath a “bronze Beaux Arts statue of a loin-clothed hunk straining at a cider press” (*Michael Tolliver Lives* 203) on their way to the de Young Museum, the pair share a moment of teasing prompted by the “naked haunches flexing above” (*Michael* 204). Michael “smiled at this odd-familiar blend of maternal scolding and man-to-man ribbing” (*Michael* 204). Michael values Anna’s multiplicity and it becomes clear throughout the series that her hybridity rubs off on some of the other characters, Michael and Jake included. In *The Days of Anna Madrigal*, Anna explains to Wren a “Whoa, Nellie” (306) reference that Brian makes. According to Anna,

[t]here had been plenty of talk about butch and nellie in those days. Anna in fact had worried that Michael would embrace one or the other to such a degree that the natural blend could not occur. She need not have fretted. In no time at all an entire orchestra of gender traits were at Michael’s command, and he took joy in the mix. He had once been fond of referring to himself as the Butchinelli Brothers. (*Days* 307)

Michael’s embracing of a hybrid identity that encompasses both ‘butch’ and ‘femme’ functions to subvert the hegemonic impulse to distinguish between the masculine and the feminine and position these gender expressions as opposites.

For Jake, it takes some time before he accepts a hybrid position for himself. When Jake asks Michael if he noticed Anna's new nail polish in *Michael Tolliver Lives*, Michael responds by asking if Jake is responsible for it, to which Jake retorts "[y]eah right" (49). Michael interprets Jake's response and the complementary snort as a reminder "that [Jake] was strictly the heavy-hauling dude in the building; the seriously girly shit was left to his flatmates" (*Michael Tolliver* 49). In *Mary Ann in Autumn*, however, it is possible to see how Anna has started to influence Jake when he adopts her "silly greeting," calling out "[y]oo hoo" when he enters their flat (36). By the last book in the series, *The Days of Anna Madrigal*, Jake paints Anna's nails himself and Anna claims that this is how Jake "keeps his lady side alive" (179). According to Anna, "[b]oth sides are necessary" (179) and she explains to Wren that Brian is "[h]ow I kept my man side alive. He was my buddy back at Barbary Lane. We had some fine man-to-man talks. The way men can do sometimes" (179).

Despite occupying these hybrid positions, Anna still receives a certain degree of condescension. In *The Days of Anna Madrigal*, when Anna, Wren and Brian are eating at a lakefront restaurant at Camp Richardson, they are served by "a waiter who thought it was cute to call Anna 'young lady' with every refill" (*Days* 180). Wren rises to defend Anna, muttering that the waiter is a "[c]ondescending asshole" (*Days* 180). Anna, however, insists that "I don't mind, dear. He thinks he's being charming," to which Wren responds that, "if he talked to *me* like a six-year-old, I'd personally hand him his nuts on a platter" (*Days* 180; italics in original). Anna may claim that she does not mind but it seems more that she permits the waiter's condescension out of kindness and a disinclination to make a fuss. Anna is thus presented as someone who is above being condescended upon – she is immune to the kinds of remarks that seek to oppress and patronise. Here, Anna is not a victim or child; she is a pillar of strength and humanity.

### Narrative Tropes and Conventions

Narrative tropes concerning rebirth, renewal and coming of age; coming out and completion; and double identity tend to be used to problematic effect in many contemporary popular genre fictions representing trans\* identity. For the most part, these conventions are used in reductive ways that fail to account for the complexities of gender. Together, most of the texts analysed in Part One convey the message that rebirth, renewal and coming of age can only be achieved through surgery and a body that is congruent with one's identity. The way characters are often robbed of the ability to come out by being outed by an antagonist first prevents these characters from articulating their identities for themselves, which can render the queer invisible. Repeated messages about the need for completion—or to be normal or 'fixed'—imply that to be trans\* is to be broken, meaning that the 'wrong body' must always be reshaped to fit societal expectations of normative, binary gender for the trans\* person to feel safe and comfortable in society. Discourses of double identity pit the male self against the female self in a futile 'battle of the sexes' that implies that identities can only be singular—one or the other—as opposed to multiple and all-encompassing. Consequently, a significant portion of the popular fiction available on what it means to be trans\* provides representations that, instead of challenging societal preoccupations with binaries, congruence and conformity, suggest that to be trans\* is to be other, broken, incomplete, silent, invisible and one-dimensional.

Although Armistead Maupin's *Tales of the City* series partly conforms to some of these tropes, it conveys some different messages about what it means to be trans\*. Yes, trans\* might mean feeling 'unfinished' until surgery has shaped the body one identifies with, but it also means not having to fully conform to societal expectations of a congruent body, as Jake demonstrates by never receiving a phallus and eventually growing comfortable with having his genitals fondled once he meets Amos (see Chapter 8). For Anna, surgery is a life-

affirming decision that occurs outside the chronological scope of the narrative instead of at the end of the novel and after a long struggle for social acceptance. Being transgender, as far as Maupin is concerned, does not mean having to battle it out between one's male self and female self – it is possible to be a transman with a feminine side and it is possible to be a transwoman who embraces a balance between the masculine and the feminine. Furthermore, being trans does not necessarily mean being confined to the gender binary; Anna demonstrates that it is possible to be a transwoman who exists in the space both between these genders and outside of them. Trans\* no longer has to mean being confined to a singular, one-dimensional identity; trans\* can be multiple and all-encompassing. With Anna's character, Maupin makes transgender lives visible and heard – Anna is granted the agency to narrate her own coming out story and has full power in who finds out, as well as how and when. Furthermore, she is depicted as strong, fierce and capable, she resists tropes of victimisation, and she demonstrates that the transgender can accommodate not only both the masculine and feminine but also the androgynous and that which exists outside binary gender.

## Chapter 7:

### Subversion and Reinforcement of Dark Themes

Dark and serious themes are commonly relied upon in contemporary popular fiction representations of trans\* identities. These themes include but are not limited to violence, abuse, prejudice, bullying, harassment, mental health, death and illness. The overreliance on these themes has caused them to become reductive tropes that do little to expand on the complexity of gender and instead pathologise trans\* identities by confining them to the realm of the victim and the mentally unwell. Armistead Maupin's *Tales of the City* adopts many of these themes, too; however, the series, for the most part, does so in a way that subverts and displaces the reader's expectations. Significantly, out of the nine novels, there are very few instances that involve violence, abuse, prejudice, bullying and harassment. However, the moments that are included have an important function in the series overall and are approached in ways that resist conventional understandings of the queer as victimised.

Although Maupin includes references to antidepressants and similar medication taken by characters in the series for mental health reasons (and other reasons), Michael is the main person whose medical regime is given the most detail—the reader learns about the medication he takes for depression and AIDS in *Michael Tolliver Lives* (19). Maupin chooses not to describe any medication that Anna might be taking (except Anna does claim that “I have a damn prescription” (*Days* 23) for marijuana) and only references Jake's use of testosterone. Anna is never represented as depressed or anxious but Jake has social anxiety, which is conveniently resolved after his hysterectomy. The significant differences between *Tales of the City* and many contemporary popular trans\* fictions are the way it incorporates themes of violence, abuse and harassment. This chapter analyses the role of Jake's social anxiety in relation to space and place before moving on to examine the subversion of dark themes including abuse, harassment and violence in the *Tales of the City* series.

### Jake's anxiety: The Queer Body in Place and Space

Although *Tales of the City* positions Anna Madrigal as a trans character who defies many of the conventional tropes often found in contemporary popular genre fiction representations of trans\* identity, Jake conforms to some of these problematic modes of representation. He both resists and conforms to heteronormative expectations about binary gender congruence. In terms of his character development over the last three novels in which he appears, Jake shifts from being an anxious, single man who resists aligning with stereotypically feminine practices to being a more socially confident man who is in a healthy relationship and has embraced more of his 'feminine side.' Jake's perspective towards things like nail polish and blushing changes over the course of the last three instalments in the *Tales* series. As mentioned in Chapter 6, Jake shifts from a 'yeah right' attitude about his relationship with nail polish to eventually doing Anna's nails himself. In undertaking this task, Jake occupies a more hybrid position in terms of his gender and thus demonstrates that he is not just a masculine man but one who can embrace some aspects of his femininity and thus challenge the binary between masculine and feminine expectations, expression and performance.

Jake's view about his blushing is a particularly telling example of the way in which he relinquishes the need for a 'pure' masculinity and embraces himself as he is. The fact that he shifts from a hatred of "those telltale blushes" (*Mary Ann* 32) to a point where "he wouldn't mind keeping the blushing" (*Mary Ann* 353) demonstrates his growth in terms of his self-acceptance and confidence. This shift occurs mostly over the course of *Mary Ann in Autumn*, in which Jake moves closer to receiving his hysterectomy while navigating the challenges he faces with his social anxiety and his fear of being 'discovered.' Early in the eighth novel, a difficult client at Plant Parenthood tells Jake that "[y]our beard is splattered with something" (32). Jake's immediate thought is "*He knows . . . He knows and he's having fun with me*"

(*Mary Ann* 32). Jake's response is to try "to show that he was indifferent to mud and beyond humiliation by this douche bag, but the wildfire raging across his face told another story"

(*Mary Ann* 32). Jake's anxiety stirs in the face of antagonism and Jake's fear that he has been identified as trans is made worse for him by the fact that he is blushing, which he sees as a stereotypically feminine function of his biology that will 'give him away.'

Jake conforms to the trope of the trans person at war with their biological self, fighting to set 'right' the body that has been 'wronged.' He has already made the initial step of taking testosterone, which has bulked him out, and having a double mastectomy. His next step is to receive a hysterectomy. By the end of *Mary Ann in Autumn*, he wonders "if losing his uterus would eliminate [the blushing], and if, in fact, he even wanted it eliminated anymore. He wanted all the man stuff, for sure, but he wouldn't mind keeping the blushing. It was just his heart doing semaphore" (*Mary Ann* 353). This shift in perspective can be partially attributed to Jake's time getting to know Jonah, who blushes about as much as he does. It is possible to argue that, in being accepted and desired by someone who assumes he is a cisgender man, Jake can overcome his anxiety about blushing. His social awkwardness, however, is only resolved after he receives his hysterectomy.

Jake's social anxiety can most readily be attributed to his feelings of alienation, which come from living in a hegemonic society that values the assumed distinction between 'male' and 'female.' In understanding that "[s]paces and bodies are intimately connected" (Johnston and Longhurst 53), it must also be acknowledged that the relationship between the two is complex and dynamic. In this way, Jake's body simultaneously informs and is informed by the space he inhabits. By being a transman without a penis, he disrupts social expectations of congruent masculinity. However, by presenting as stereotypically masculine, he conforms to these expectations – he is muscular, has facial hair, embodies a strong masculine performativity and passes easily amongst heterocentric crowds. Yet, he fears the judgment of

other queer characters who might be critical of his gendered expression. Jake's characterisation as a typical masculine man fits a wider United States cultural value of the 'clone' look of male masculinity (jeans and plaid). His queer identity is not one that seeks to queer space or unsettle expectations but, rather, aims to fit in and conform to dominant sociocultural expectations, so as not to be targeted or victimised for his perceived differences.

In the *Tales of the City* series, San Francisco culture in the late 70s and beyond are highly representative of the times both in this city and throughout the States. Queer identities are mapped in relation to San Francisco society, culture, spaces and places as well as the wider politics of the time in the United States. One of the most significant limitations in the series, that of Jake's anxiety about social spaces and his hesitation to inhabit queer public space, reflects significant trends experienced by members of queer communities in San Francisco and the United States during the 70s and beyond.

The 70s and 80s, were ones rife with backlash and political struggle. Although American culture, gender styles and gender expression had undergone startling transformation after the upheavals of the 60s, transgender and queer-gendered individuals continued to suffer from institutionalised forms of sexism and social oppression (Stryker 92). During an era shaped by violence, both nationally and in Vietnam, San Francisco was exposed to "a genital-mutilating serial killer" who preyed "on transgender sex workers in the Tenderloin" (Stryker 92). At this time, gay liberation, feminist and transgender politics tended to work against each other rather than with one another. San Francisco's first pride parade in 1972 violated the no-violence policy when it resulted in fist fighting. By the mid-70s, many feminist networks widely circulated Janice G. Raymond's 'transsexual rapist trope,' the idea that transgender women violate and objectify female bodies and are agents of the patriarchal oppression of women (Stryker 106). Significant changes were also shaping in the fields of science, medicine and academia. These shifts brought the definition of gender

identity ‘disorder’ as well as procedures and protocols for managing, understanding, engineering and ‘fixing’ gender. With such a strong pathological focus, the limited options presented to trans people “were to be considered bad, sick, or wrong. Consequently, transgender communities became very inwardly focused by the 1980s. They tended to concentrate more on providing mutual aid and support to their members than on broader social activism” (Stryker 113). It would therefore be unsurprising to witness Jake’s hermitic tendencies in this context. Yet, Jake is not introduced until the seventh novel in the series, which was published in 2007 and is contemporaneous with the onset of the new millennium, a time that reflects considerable progress in trans rights, politics and social acceptance over the previous decades.

Even in the queer capital of San Francisco, after much political, social and legislative progress, spaces and places can continue to operate to exclude queer individuals. Jake’s anxiety about being in space and place, his retreat into domestic space, his comfort in queer family rather than wider queer community primarily takes place during *Mary Ann in Autumn*, which is published in 2010. Significantly, in 2007, the first piece of federal legislation ever to address transgender concerns, a hate crimes bill, passed both the Senate and House of Representatives. Although Maupin’s texts are written contemporaneously with their setting, this problematic trope about experiences of exclusion and marginality in space and place reflects an era older than the setting of the text in which it dominantly occurs. It may be that Maupin is writing about Jake’s social anxiety with the trials and tribulations of the transgender political past in mind. It might be with the memory of the violence and antagonism that characterised the 70s in San Francisco that Jake’s characterisation comes to fruition. After much progress, in which Maupin himself demonstrates his inclusive perspective, Maupin remains aware of the ways in which trans\* and queer people, regardless of their rights and protections, continue to face oppression, antagonism and marginalisation.

Even with the passing of a hate crime bill and protection under law, Jake feels out of place in queer spaces and social spaces.

In the *Tales* series, a great deal of the characters' nightlife and outings take place in the Castro, which, according to *The Daily Californian*, "has been a site of queer resistance, LGBTQ+ counterculture movements and the open expression of LGBTQ+ pride [for decades]" (The Daily Californian, par. 1). Jake, however, struggles to find a space within the Castro that suits his identity and sexual interests. He fits in neither at the Lone Star, which is filled with "liquored-up bio bears," nor at the Lexington club, where other trans guys are "flirting with the femme dykes" (*Mary Ann* 34). Jake's feeling that he belongs in neither of these spaces and cannot find someone who is interested in him highlights both a resistance to gender binaries as well as the way in which trans\* identities can complicate categories of sexual desire. He cannot find a partner at the Lone Star because it is full of gay men who expect him to have a penis; and he cannot find a partner at the Lexington because he is not interested in women. As for the other transmen that frequent these spaces, Jake believes they are not interested in him. Jake therefore finds

Pier 39 a welcome relief from the Castro. The ghetto, for all its acceptance and security, made him feel like all eyes were upon him, since, for the most part, they *were*. If they weren't sizing him up for sex, they were judging his believability or resenting him for denying the honest butch dyke they thought he should be. At Pier 39 Jake was just another guy in the crowd. His manhood could be casual there, an easy assumption shared by everyone. (*Mary Ann* 74; italics in original)

Jake thus leaves the queer space allocated to him (Castro) and inserts himself into heteronormative terrain (Pier 39), where his masculine expression is seen as a norm and he can 'pass' in a crowd that, by assuming he is a cisgender male, is less likely to judge him.

It is in this way that the body, as Vicki Kirby (1997) argues, both writes and is written (61): “bodies are more than just texts written upon by representational fields; instead, flesh is articulated by language. Cultural contexts do not simply surround sexed and gendered bodies but also come to inhabit them” (Johnston and Longhurst 46). Jake’s queer body holds the potential to both shape and reflect cultural contexts. Perhaps his realisation of this power contributes to his anxiety about his role in space and society. The social and feminist geographer Lynda Johnston explains that

[t]ransgender, gender variant and intersex people exist in all societies yet little is known about their relationship to place. Many gender variant people experience discrimination, oppression and marginalisation in relation to specific places and spaces. Some spaces and places create geographies of belonging for gender variant people. There has been limited research about gender variant people’s feelings of ‘being in and/or out of place.’ As a consequence, cisgender people who conform to a male/female gender binary may have little to no understanding of the issues affecting gender variant people’s lives. (Johnston xii)

Although Jake is a fictional character, his relationship with his geography demonstrates how, “in many different ways, LGBTIQ community places and space may be both welcoming and discriminatory of gender variant bodies” (Johnston 13). Johnston’s research helps shed light on some of the limitations of Maupin’s writing.

For the most part, Maupin’s work challenges heterocentric and binary understandings of gender. Yet, most of the queer characters in the series experience privilege through wealth, race and ability. Despite Michael’s insistence on the financial difficulties of everyday life, he remains a white lower-middleclass cisgender male who never has to confront the harsh realities of homelessness, poverty, racial discrimination, inaccessibility or gender bias.

Johnston explains the significance of queer space and place, arguing that “[n]ot ‘fitting in’ is illustrated in the high levels of homelessness for transgender youth (Reck 2009), and this happens even in gay neighbourhoods such as Castro, San Francisco” (Brown 2014; Johnston 13). Furthermore, “[i]n places that are considered to be ‘safe havens’ for LGBTIQ people, such as San Francisco’s neighbourhood Castro, levels of homelessness are high for trans youth of colour” (Reck 2009; Johnston 55). Maupin strives for inclusivity and wide representation; however, his series does not allow space for a conversation about the realities of poverty, homelessness, unemployment and racial discrimination in relation to queer identity. All his queer characters have a home and a means of living. This would not be an issue if this were only the case in Maupin’s writing; yet, most texts analysed in this thesis follow a similar pattern of privilege, with characters occupying spaces as white, middleclass citizens faced with very few of the barriers that oppress and regulate minority groups. However, what Maupin offers to his readers is an idea of how space and place can function to both welcome and alienate queer people.

Jake both disrupts and conforms to expectations of appropriately gendered behaviour. Early in *Mary Ann in Autumn*, the reader learns that Jake

was no good at meeting people. Even at a support group for trans folk he felt like a visiting Martian. He had thought that would change once he’d made the leap, but so far, claiming another gender – even the one that came naturally to him – had merely offered new ways to feel alienated, new opportunities for humiliation. (*Mary Ann* 34)

Jake’s social anxiety extends to both meeting prospective partners and mingling in the queer community. Even in overtly queer spaces, Jake feels like he does not fit in. His frustration with the Castro dating scene reveals the challenges of being a person whose biology is not

congruent with his gender identity in a community that, even though queer, continues to rely on the binary categorisation of feminine and masculine spaces.

In her book, *Transgender History*, Susan Stryker writes about the significance of the Compton's Cafeteria riot in San Francisco in 1966, arguing that the resistance that took place helped to

create a space in which it became possible for the city of San Francisco to begin relating differently to its transgender citizens—to begin treating them, in fact, as citizens with legitimate needs instead of simply as a problem to get rid of. (74-5)

Stryker concludes that “[b]y the end of the 1960s, the combined efforts of politically mobilized transgender communities, sympathetic professionals, and public servants, and a generous infusion of private money made San Francisco the unquestioned hub of the transgender movement in the United States” (81). San Francisco, before any other city in the States, starts to afford more respect and rights to transgender people. The 1960s is a significant era in transgender political activism across the United States, with transgender people taking the first crucial steps towards redefining their needs and life goals in terms of social services, state-sanctioned medical care and legal accommodation of their identities.

Yet, if San Francisco is considered the hub of the transgender movement in the United States, why do its spaces continue to be organised according to binary gender distinctions? If anything, ‘trans’ functions to unsettle these categories. According to Johnston and Longhurst, “Susan Stryker (2006) points out that ‘trans’ is not just about gender issues. It is also about sex and sexuality. It is about how gendered, sexed and sexual bodies trouble and transgress binaries, spaces and places” (Johnston and Longhurst 53). Yet, Jake’s gendered, sexed and sexual body does not occupy these binary spaces long enough to impact them. Petra Doan argues that “transgendered and gender variant people experience the gendered division of

space as a special kind of tyranny – the tyranny of gender – that arises when people dare to challenge the hegemonic expectations for appropriately gendered behaviour in western society” (Doan 635). Jake experiences this tyranny of gender in the form of his social anxiety, which sprouts from his feeling of not belonging in a queer community that reinforces the gender dichotomy through the allocation of masculine space and feminine space but does not allow any room for those people whose identities unsettle the supposed distinctions between ‘male’ and ‘female.’

Jake’s assumptions that other “bio guys” and trans men “weren’t looking for Jake” (*Mary Ann* 34) reveals a similar division between the masculine and the feminine that works in contradiction to the series’ messages of hybridity, androgyny and multiplicity. By insisting that other men are only interested in either cisgendered masculine men or feminine women, Jake closes himself off to the complex possibilities of queer desire. Even though Jake, through his own identity and gender incongruence, challenges binary understandings of gender, the way he thinks about his place in the San Francisco dating scene reflects a binary view about other kinds of identities that fails to acknowledge the multiple forms that gender can take. Indeed, there are not just masculine men and feminine women in the world but also masculine women, feminine men, androgynous men and women, genderqueer, agender and nonbinary folks, as well as those who encompass multiple genders, fluid and changing genders or no gender at all. Gender is a spectrum of colours but here, in this moment of the *Tales* series, Jake only sees the black and white – the masculine and the feminine. In marking himself out as not being what other transmen or cisgender men are looking for, Jake shuts down his own queer possibility as well as that of his potential suitors. This same pattern can be seen in his anxiety about Buck Angel (see Chapter 8). By the last book in the series, however, Jake has overcome most of his anxiety about the dating scene, his body and his own lack of ability to fit in with the binary world around him.

### Overcoming Anxiety through Surgery

In *The Days of Anna Madrigal*, Anna notes that Jake

was well into his thirties and, since his hysterectomy two years earlier, had become a far more sociable creature. He even brought friends by the house these days – a varied ensemble, to say the least, some bejeweled of brow and brilliant of plumage, others swaggering in Elvis haircuts or prim as movie librarians, pop approximations of their psyches. They seemed fond of Jake, she was glad to see, and some of the ones with boys' names stayed the night. (*Days* 20)

The attribution of Jake's improved sociability to his hysterectomy reinforces problematic messages about completion – now that he has stopped the biological functions of his uterus (including the capacity to bleed, ovulate and reproduce), he now sees himself as more of a man, as a 'complete' man. This is not to say that trans\* people should not undergo surgery if they elect to do so – every person has the right to choose how they want to shape their body; for *Tales of the City*, however, the narrative already has a fully congruent trans person – adding another to the story functions only to reinforce the patriarchal value of congruent, binary identities. Moreover, the description of Jake's friends as presenting “pop approximations of their psyches” reflects an inherent importance in expressing an external self that 'matches' an internal self, thus reinforcing hegemonic values concerning consistency.

Although Jake's completion is subverted by his lack of a phallus, the idea that surgery has granted him this new social freedom says more about Jake's own feelings of comfort with himself than the power of surgery to 'complete' a person. For Jake, removing his uterus is an important step in helping him to build his confidence and self-acceptance. In *Mary Ann in*

*Autumn*, Jake talks about how it will be easier to date “when I’m finished” (168). As the next chapter demonstrates, Jake struggles in the dating scene until he has received his hysterectomy. Once he has received this surgery, he finds himself able to function in the social setting he initially felt estranged in. Indeed, much of Jake’s early discomfort stems from his feelings of difference – in a setting organised by spaces that emphasise binary gender and congruent identities, he fails to conform to societal expectations of a clear division between the sexes. It is in this way that Jake’s anxiety about himself and the social world around him are conveniently ‘fixed’ by surgery and Jake is thus able to better fit in through his conformation with these expectations. Yet, despite becoming more ‘sociable’ by the last book in the series, this improved confidence on Jake’s part is complemented not only by the fact that he has coupled up with Amos but also by a retreat to domestic space.

#### Retreating to the Safety of Domestic Space

Maupin’s series plays an important role in bringing queer life into everyday homes, especially with the series’ origin as a column in the *San Francisco Chronicle*. A great deal of the series’ content takes place inside the homes of its queer characters, thus offering ‘windows’ into their queer lives for the sake of the series’ cisgender and heterosexual readership. Jake’s trajectory over the three novels in which he appears takes him from being a single man, new to town and trying to find a space where he fits in the social spaces of San Francisco, to being a man in a relationship whose social life is predominantly confined to the domestic space he lives in and shares with Anna. He may have more friends outside his family circle but these friends are ones who come to visit him within the safety of his home; they do not occupy public space with Jake within the narratives. The major plotline of *The Days of Anna Madrigal* involves leaving the city, travelling to the desert and attending the Burning Man Festival. Here, Jake has no trouble fitting in, since he and Amos park up in a

space called 'Trans Bay,' which, as its name suggests, is a space allocated exclusively for people who are trans\*. In this last novel, Jake does not visit spaces such as the Castro or Pier 39, which he used to do in the preceding novels.

Jake may have more friends and he may have found a sense of belonging with his group of friends, logical family and boyfriend, but has he indeed overcome his social anxiety? His confinement within domestic space suggests that perhaps he has not. His coupling with Amos might contribute to the lack of need to go out, since his early days in social spaces were mostly for the sake of meeting potential partners. Now that the struggles of the dating game are over for Jake, perhaps he sees no need to depart from the comfort and safety of his domesticity. Yet, there is no reason why he could not go out with Amos. In fact, if spaces and bodies are so bound up with one another, it follows that Jake has been ostracised (even if by his own choice) from social space and that this space no longer stands to benefit from being informed by Jake's queer body. By claiming a place for himself in social settings, Jake would contribute to the shaping of this space. By being queer in space, one can queer space, but Jake chooses not to; he retreats from public space and settles for domestic privacy. In this way, Jake's character conforms to ideas of safety and complacency in ways that reinforce problematic messages about what it means to be trans\*.

Jake's social anxiety not only perpetuates the trope of trans\* as mentally unwell but it also delivers a problematic message about the confinement and repression of queer gender identities. The visibility of transgender people and others who identify under the queer umbrella is more important than ever. In *Transgender History*, Susan Stryker writes about the activist group Queer Nation and their "strategy . . . simply [to] erupt into visibility in the everyday spaces of daily city life by how one dressed . . . with provocative or cryptic political messages printed on [clothing] . . . with slogans such as WE ARE EVERYWHERE and WE'RE HERE, WE'RE QUEER, GET USED TO IT" (135; caps in original). Occupying

public space as a queer person—regardless of how overtly political one chooses to present—will make a fundamental impact on informing these spaces as well as the minds of the everyday people who inhabit them. If people who are queer claim their space—especially without conforming to societal expectations of gender congruence and stereotypical binary gender roles—they contribute to the restructuring of this space as diverse and inclusive. Jake’s retreat to the safety of his domesticity does nothing to contribute to the queering of space and place. Fortunately, Anna Madrigal’s position as a character who resists and subverts dark themes demonstrates that the transgender does not always have to be repressed or victimised.

#### Violence, Harassment and Abuse

Violence, harassment and abuse are common themes in popular contemporary narratives about transgender identity and experience. The convention is that the trans\* character will often become victim to one or multiple of these forms of derogatory behaviour. These representations of trans\* victimisation predominantly aim to evoke sympathy in the reader and help shape an understanding of the kinds of oppression that trans\* people face in their daily lives. However, the fact that trans\* characters are so commonly represented as victims implies that victimisation and helplessness are an inherent part of what it means to have queer gender. In making these characters prone to violence, abuse and prejudice, many contemporary popular fiction authors—without necessarily intending to do so—render the queer as pathetic and without agency. Of course, there are exceptions to this trope. As Grady demonstrates in *Parrotfish*, being transgender does not mean having to succumb to bullying. Although the *Tales of the City* series includes the abuse and harassment of three of its cisgender male characters (two of whom are gay), the series’ transgender characters Jake and Anna resist this trope of victimisation by never being represented as the victims of derogatory

or transphobic violence. Jake is never presented in any situations of discrimination, harassment or abuse; Anna, however, does experience violence but not as a victim. The transgender therefore occupies a very different role in relation to violence in the series.

In the third book in the series, before Michael and Brian are abused and Brian is hospitalised, Anna Madrigal holds a woman named Bambi prisoner in her basement at the behest of Mary Ann, who needs to prevent the woman from interfering with her exclusive news story involving Dede Halcyion's kidnapped children. It is regarding the twins that Anna confesses her affair with Edgar (the children's now dead grandfather) to Brian and Michael:

[i]f I'm not mistaken, one of the twins was named after me. The little girl, I presume . . . The little boy is Edgar . . . Edgar and Anna. Isn't that lovely symbolism? Our affair was memorialized by those children. They're coming home safe and sound if I have to *strangle* that ridiculous woman in the basement. (Maupin, *Further Tales* 205; italics in original)

Anna is presented not as the victim but as the perpetrator, a decision that inverts the way the trope of violence and abuse pans out in the popular trans\* fictions examined in Part One. Yet, even as the perpetrator, Anna is not represented in an antagonistic light – she is passionately committed to keeping these children safe and capable of engaging in violent extremes to do so. When Anna delivers a meal to Bambi, the woman attempts to escape; thus, a brutal and comical scene of violence ensues between the two women:

[c]rumpling to her knees, she looked up to see the newscaster's triumphant sneer as Bambi kicked her once . . . twice . . . three times in the stomach. On the third kick, Mrs. Madrigal seized Bambi's ankle and twisted it sharply, eliciting a scream of Samurai intensity. . . . Wheezing in pain, Mrs. Madrigal reached for a loop of garden hose and hoisted herself to a near-standing position. . . . Her fingers found the handle

of a shovel, which she wielded like a mace, bringing it down squarely on Bambi's backside. For a moment, and only a moment, the newscaster was splayed against the floor like a swastika. Then she lurched to her feet and made her way through the doorway and up the steps. Mrs. Madrigal staggered after her, still brandishing the shovel. When Bambi reached the top of the stairs, the landlady swung wildly, clipping her adversary in the back of her knees. Bambi fell forward ingloriously, then slid back down the steps until her ankles were once more within the landlady's grasp. Mrs. Madrigal dragged the newscaster back into the basement, wrapped her ankles hastily with a length of electrical cord, and hurried out the door, locking it behind her.

(Maupin, *Further Tales* 214; first two ellipses in original)

Unlike the other significant scene of violence in the series—that of Michael and Brian getting attacked—this scene is designed to convey Anna as a strong and capable person rather than a flimsy old lady or damsel in distress.

Even though she is about sixty years old in *Further Tales*, Anna Madrigal demonstrates determination and power. Despite falling and bleeding, Anna continues to fight. Once she gets a shovel in her hands, the reader's impression of Anna is a curious combination of brutality and ridiculousness. Anna is described as swinging 'wildly' – clearly this is not a woman to be messed with! She brings the shovel down on Bambi's backside, which functions like a smacked bottom, creating a brutal impression of matriarchal punishment that is at once hilarious and terrifying. This scene defies every expectation I have acquired about representations of trans\* characters in fiction. Where trans\* characters in the contemporary popular fictions analysed in Part One are often victimised, Anna is engaging in a scene of violence that subverts these expectations not only by having absolutely nothing to do with Anna's gender identity or expression but also by positioning the transgender character as the instigator—rather than the recipient—of violence. Anna's success in this

battle with Bambi, although somewhat ridiculous, demonstrates that Anna refuses to be victimised, beaten or abused. She is beyond these common conventions of popular trans\* fiction and instead occupies the position of a transgender warrior.

The repetition of pathologising tropes to do with mental health, feelings of not belonging and experiences of victimisation in contemporary popular trans\* fictions is problematic because it perpetuates the marginalisation of difference. Jake's experiences of social anxiety, particularly alongside his convenient 'overcoming' of them via surgery and his subsequent retreat to domestic space, reinforce patterns of trans\* othering and alienation. Although Jake's feelings of being out of place, especially in the queer community, limit the potential for the queer body to influence and be influenced by public space, Anna's encounter with violence subverts dominant ideologies that situate queer genders as victimised. That Anna never becomes a victim on account of her identity or expression might be attributed to her ability to 'pass,' which she does for almost two whole novels before she comes out to her family. Anna's role in her scene of domestic violence demonstrates that the transgender no longer needs to be equated with being a victim. Anna proves that, regardless of age or gender identification, the transgender can occupy a space of agency, power and strength in fiction. Anna consolidates her position as a respected matriarch, a powerful transwoman and a feisty badass. By occupying the space of perpetrator rather than victim, Anna's character destabilises the trope of trans\* victimisation, proving that characters with queer genders have more potential when they are freed from the constraints of pathologisation. This potential also opens avenues for exploration in terms of the possibilities that can come with queer desire.

## Chapter 8: Sex and Desire

One of the most significant differences between the *Tales of the City* series and many contemporary trans\* fictions is the role of sex and desire. Where many popular genre fiction representations of queer gender tend to avoid the subject of sex and reduce their queer characters to a desireless and/or undesired status, Maupin explores sexual diversity and desire in a way that enriches the characters and develops their complexity. As Warhol argues, “*Tales of the City* represents a world where sexual performance is central to identity” (393). Although many characters enjoy promiscuous and diverse sexual lifestyles, many of the details of these practices are either limited or left out. This decision prevents the series’ heterosexual or prurient readership from feeling alienated; however, it simultaneously “opens up an imaginative world of gay sex and desire that had not made its way into mainstream discourse before and would therefore have been literally unimaginable to many of the series’ original readers” (Warhol 393).

Maupin treats the sexual content of his work carefully, offering scenes that build up to the sexual act and that may mention the preparation of toys or a heated moment of kissing and fondling, but leaving explicit sexual details closed behind the metaphorical bedroom door. The reader is thus left to their own imaginative devices while the sexual action of the series’ characters continues ‘off-stage.’ However, the series also includes sexualised moments designed to shock, such as when Michael slaps Mona “on the fanny” (*Tales* 103). Provocative moments such as this one lend the series a refreshing appeal and challenge traditional narrative conventions. Most significant is the fact that the series’ central transgender characters are given sexual lives, regardless of whether the reader is permitted to view the corresponding sexual acts or not.

The inclusion of not just one but two transgender characters who experience desire and are desirable functions to resist the reductive trope of the trans\* character without desire in contemporary popular fiction representations of trans\* identity. Anna Madrigal and Jake Greenleaf play essential roles in contributing to the queering of narrative and the subversion of hegemonic expectations, demonstrating that being trans\* can mean having sexual agency and confidence.

### Anna: Sexual Agency and Autonomy

In the first novel in the series, before the reader finds out about her transgender status, Anna has a short-lived affair with Edgar Halcyon – short-lived because he is told he will die in six months and does so towards the close of the novel. Their relationship is kept secret from the other characters but is otherwise sweet and playful. Most of their dates take place at the beach or in parks and are characterised by a youthful frivolity, instigated mostly by Anna, who is 56 years old at the time. During one of their beach dates, they spot “a group of teenagers flying a huge Mylar kite with a shimmering tail” (*Tales* 60). Edgar says, “[r]emember how much fun that used to be?”, to which Anna responds, “[u]sed to? I fly kites all the time. It’s *delicious* when you’re stoned” (60; italics in original). Anna’s acquisition of the kite highlights her whimsy and playfulness, characteristics which define both her personality and sexuality.

Edgar’s and Anna’s ensuing dates tell the reader more about Anna, her background “growing up in a whorehouse” (115) and the kind of person she is – which is to say, someone who defies conservative expectations to do with age, gender, ‘appropriate’ behaviour and self-expression. On another date with Edgar, Anna starts to feel the cold and tells him “[i]t’s colder than a witch’s titty out here” (115). When Edgar tells her “I didn’t know nice girls knew that expression,” she tells him, “[t]hey don’t” (115), which refers to both her transgender status and the fact that she is not a typical ‘nice’ girl. As the wind rises and the

beach date concludes, the two engage in some frivolity: “she jumped up suddenly, giving his loosened tie a yank, and pranced down the beach. Edgar chased her back into the dunes, then tackled her with a Samurai yelp” (120). The two develop a close bond and, finally, it is implied that Anna and Edgar go to bed together: “Anna’s bedroom had been carefully groomed for Edgar’s arrival” and Edgar surveys “the room for the first time” (*Tales* 174). The lead-up to their insinuated sexual foray includes some light joking and teasing.

When Edgar asks, “[n]o waterbed?” (174), Anna tells him, “[i]t’s in the shop for repairs. I had a gentleman caller last night and we nearly drowned the cat” (174). Edgar then asks about the cat, to which Anna responds, “[y]ou’re supposed to say ‘[w]hat gentleman caller?’ Goddammit!” (174). When Edgar acquiesces by asking this question, Anna says “I’ve forgotten. There’ve been so many!” (174). Anna’s responses are playful, teasing, humorous and daring. She risks being viewed as promiscuous in joking about her abundance of gentlemen callers but achieves the effect of coming across as a sexually confident woman, which is not a common position for trans\* characters in popular fiction, whose authors tend to represent them as being without sexual desire rather than risk the character being perceived as perverted by having sexual agency. Significantly, however, if the series is being read in chronological order, the reader does not yet know at this point that Anna is transgender. What this means is that, before the reader can make any assumptions about Anna based on her transgender status, she is already being established as a character who is fun, sexually confident and loveable. Compared with the other characters in the series, Anna is afforded with the most privacy in terms of her sexual exploits. However, this decision suits her mysterious and elusive character: “you are talking to a Woman of Mystery!” (*More Tales* 93), Anna tells Brian when she comes out as transgender. In fact, she often chides her family members, or makes a joke, when they begin asking questions that are too personal.

It is not until *Sure of You*, the sixth novel in the series, that Anna has another relationship. Anna and Mona take a holiday on the Grecian shores of the Isle of Lesbos, where Anna meets and is shown around by a man named Stratos. Even more so than Anna's previous relationship with Edgar, the reader is given very few details about Stratos and no explicit details about their sexual relationship. The curious exception here is that Anna's relationship with Stratos is perceived and analysed through Mona's eyes. Stratos, a "handsome old codger," described as "short and dapper" (*Sure of You* 131), joins Mona at the Costa restaurant on the esplanade in Molivos where they chat before Anna joins them. The three eat dinner together and, after Stratos mentions that he and Anna will be staying over for a few days at his cousin's house in Pelopi, Mona realises what is going on between her parent and the Grecian man: "[n]odding slowly, Mona saw the light. Of course. They were fucking. Or at least wanted to be very soon" (*Sure of You* 135). Mona's blunt analysis of the situation allows Anna to characteristically remain elusive but also provides the opportunity to demonstrate that Anna, like many other humans, is a person who experiences and receives sexual desire.

What queers this relationship, however, is the unexplained identification of Stratos as "an actual lesbian" (*Michael Tolliver Lives* 71), which is curious given Michael's parallel description of Mona as "the lowercase lesbian" (*Michael Tolliver Lives* 71). Perhaps Stratos identifies as a woman? Perhaps he is a trans man? Perhaps he is all sorts of identities or defies definition altogether. One way or another, if Stratos is to be read as a lesbian, this means that he identifies as a woman; it therefore follows that Anna can be read as a lesbian too, if she is attracted to another woman. In this way, Maupin queers the narrative, leaving these identifications and labels murky and unclear, opening the potential of Anna's queer desire. Maupin builds on this ambiguity even further by adding the additional dimension of humour:

“[t]hat it was Anna, and not her dyke daughter, who was about to be laid on the Sapphic isle was an irony lost on neither one of them” (*Sure of You* 135).

Fortunately for Mona, she does find the sexual gratification she was looking for with both an American tourist named Susan and a German girl named Frieda. Details of the threesome are left out; however, it only comes about because of Stratos’ recommendation that Mona visit the beach at Skala Eressou, the birthplace of Sappho. When Mona returns to Molivos, Anna tells her about the torrential, all-night rainstorm she experienced when she returned with Stratos: “[w]e were giddy on the ozone. We flung open the shutters and let it just tear through the house . . . I was quite the madwoman” (203). Mona notices the candles and asks if the storm took out the electricity; when Anna tells her they were for “atmosphere” (204), Mona decides not to “pursue this, but the image that leapt to mind was of Anna buck naked in a thunderstorm, head wreathed in laurel, arms aloft, like some transcendental Evita” (204). This image is the closest the reader gets in the entire series to witnessing Anna in a sexual act. However, it is not the final example that reflects her role as a desirous and desirable human.

In *The Days of Anna Madrigal*, the reader learns about Anna’s youth, her time growing up at the Blue Moon Lodge, and her journey discovering her identity. When Lasko informs Andy that the Rexall Train is not coming to Nevada and they can no longer run away, the two share an awkward hug and Andy notes feeling that

he would have liked a kiss at the moment, a tender, uncomplicated one, the kiss of a prince in a movie musical. . . . When Lasko pulled away, he looked Andy square in the eyes. “Wanna stay?” he asked huskily. “Wanna mess around?” One of his hands had already moved from Andy’s back to the front of Andy’s trousers, where, in the most perfunctory way, he began to rub Andy’s pecker through the rumped linen, as if

it were a magic lamp from which a genie could be summoned on command. (*Days* 205)

Andy tells Lasko to stop and Lasko says “[b]oys can do this, you know. . . . We help each other out. It’s what we do. . . . I’ll suck you first, if you want. I don’t mind. . . . C’mon. We won’t kiss or nothin’. I promise. We’re buddies, right? We’ll do it like men” (*Days* 205). This encounter between Lasko and Anna’s younger self illustrates the complex intersection of queer gender and queer desire. Lasko thinks Andy is another boy like himself, one who is suppressing a homosexual identity, has not yet grown into a man but experiences a sexual desire that revolves around the stimulation of the phallus. This, indeed, is not the case for Andy, whose desire is more romantic than sexual and extends to hugs and kisses but is neither ready nor ‘equipped’ for the kind of sexual encounter Lasko seeks.

Ten days later, Andy reflects on their awkward encounter:

[h]e didn’t hate Lasko for what had happened that night in the Madrigals’ garage. He was just embarrassed for them both, and sad that his very first courtship (for that’s what it had been) had ended in ugliness. Lasko had wanted Andy – no doubt about that – but Lasko had wanted a boy, and Andy had not been up to it. Had Andy mustered the nerve that night to show Lasko his Wondrous Wisteria toenails – just unlaced his shoes and flat-out showed him – Lasko might have saved face, knowing he was more of a man than Andy, and the tragedy might have been averted. But Andy had kept the truth to himself, as boys do, leaving Lasko the rejected pansy, humiliated and broken. (*Days* 228)

Although the narrative voice here conveys hope that Lasko will respond positively, it is equally likely that Lasko could reject Andy or even become violent and abusive. Regardless, this passage demonstrates that it is not just a case of Lasko wanting a boy and Andy not being

able to meet this criterion; the fact that “Andy had not been up to it” reveals a difficult tension at work inside the young Anna Madrigal – she could not invest the energy in ‘passing’ as the boy Lasko wanted her to be and she could not act on her own desire for Lasko since her desire does not revolve around her phallus (or Lasko’s, for that matter).

For Anna, desire is much more intimate than body parts alone and even more complex since she does not identify with the sexual organs she was born with. Like Susan Stryker, “[t]he shape of [her] flesh was a barrier that estranged [her] from [her] own desire” (“My Words” 248) It is therefore through transition that Anna is liberated sexually and granted the ability to act on her desires. In this sense, transition operates as a form of rebirth for Anna. As argued in Chapter 6, Anna’s surgery is a life-affirming, identity-affirming event that gives her vitality and the chance for a fresh start. Unlike many characters in contemporary trans\* fictions whose sexual lives are made redundant following the transition process, Anna’s surgery grants her the ability to act on her desires and express herself as a sexual being in a body she can identify with. This trajectory stands in stark contrast to that of Lucia in *The Secret Life of Luke Livingstone*, who settles in an asexual identity, neither having desire for others nor being desired once she has transitioned. Anna Madrigal’s sexual confidence following her transition is therefore a refreshing representation of trans\* identity that can be celebrated and enjoyed. Anna proves that being transgender does not mean having to be confined to a desireless, undesirable state; if anything, being transgender is what grants Anna her sexual confidence and gives her the freedom to act on her desires.

### Jake’s Sexual Development

As mentioned in Chapter 6, Jake is introduced entirely through Michael’s perspective, which has two significant effects on the reader’s understanding of Jake’s character. First of all, Michael’s sexual interest in Jake—especially after Michael finds out Jake is trans—allows

Jake to be seen as a person who is both desirable and desirous. Secondly, Michael is a kind, thoughtful and loving character with whom the reader can easily sympathise, which means that his perspective of Jake is not only valued by the reader but also operates to affirm Jake's identity and status as a transman. This section begins with Michael's and Jake's first meeting in *Michael Tolliver Lives*, then moves on to analyse Jake's other relationships as the series progresses – starting with Connor in the same novel then moving on to Jonah in *Mary Ann in Autumn* and then finally concluding with Amos in *The Days of Anna Madrigal*.

When Jake and Michael meet at the Lone Star Saloon, the two men talk about the kind of sex they like and Michael notes that “I was ready to take him [Jake] home by then, having already imagined the feral heat of that furry little body” (*Michael Tolliver Lives* 52). It is at this point in the narrative that Jake's transgender status is disclosed to Michael by a stranger at the urinal. Despite the problematic way in which this stranger's decision plucks Jake's agency from him, it affords the narrative a space in which Michael can speculate about his attraction to Jake, consider Jake's masculinity and think about how sex might work with Jake. Michael notes that Jake's masculinity “wasn't some phony butch overlay; it came from deep inside, and it was totally devoid of irony” (*Michael Tolliver Lives* 54). Michael examines Jake's “strong and square” jaw, his “studied” gait and his short stature (54), questioning his sexual characteristics: “I wondered if his chest was bound or if he'd had surgery. I wondered if his nipples were funny-looking. I wondered if he'd had a penis made out of whatever the fuck they make penises out of” (54). Michael wonders “if he was scared shitless right now” (54) and “what would happen once we got down to business? Would the illusion still hold? Would I embarrass myself completely, or, worse, hurt his feelings?” (*Michael Tolliver Lives* 55). Michael's curiosity, concern and kindness are a refreshing change from the dark and threatening tones that often appear in the limited popular fiction representations of trans\* desire. In *The Secret Life of Luke Livingstone*, for instance, Lucia's

friend Chloe gets beaten to death when her date realises she has a penis. Michael, however, is not a threat to Jake. The reader is therefore aware that harassment, abuse and death will not be possibilities in this encounter. Thus, the reader is spared any anxiety about where the night will go and what might happen.

When Jake starts to tell Michael that he is trans, Michael tells him he knows and that there is no need for Jake to have to explain himself. Michael justifies that it must get old having to repeat himself and levels the field of disclosure by informing Jake that “I’m HIV positive” (*Michael Tolliver Lives* 55). Following which, Jake tells Michael that “I’m really into giving head” (*Michael Tolliver Lives* 55) and that “[y]ou won’t have to do anything to me, all right? . . . [a]nd don’t worry,” he added. ‘I’ll keep my jeans on. I don’t like that thing any more than you do’” (*Michael Tolliver Lives* 56). This scenario between Jake and Michael is designed to be as easy as possible – both men remain within their comfort zones during the sexual act, with Michael not having to face his anxiety about dealing with a vagina and Jake not having to associate with the body part he cannot identify with.

Michael’s and Jake’s sexual encounter is one of the few that the reader is provided detail about: “Jake knelt between my legs and got to work with quiet efficiency” (*Michael Tolliver Lives* 58). Afterwards, Michael notes that

[m]ostly he went down on me, and that was nice, I have to say. He was a good kisser, too, though he seemed less interested in that. I felt kind of selfish, to tell you the truth, just lying back like a sultan, so I moved my leg up into those boxer shorts, thinking that a little pressure there might be appreciated. My leg was promptly redirected, so I returned to my passive state and took the rest of my cues from Jake. (*Michael Tolliver Lives* 59)

The inclusion of these sexual details functions to highlight Jake's discomfort with the existence of his vagina. Jake's sexual foray with Michael aids in expanding both Michael's horizons and those of the reader. Michael comments that "sex, I was learning, is a place where all of us go, regardless of gender or sexuality. No matter where we begin, it's just one big steamy locker room in the end" (*Michael Tolliver Lives* 57). Michael positions sex as a universal human experience, something that everyone shares and engages in. Although there are undoubtedly people who are exceptions to this norm—people who choose celibacy, for instance, or those who have asexual identities—it demonstrates what so many contemporary popular representations of trans\* identity and experience fail to do – it highlights that people with transgender, genderfluid, or nonbinary identities do not have to be thought of as either perverted or without sexual desire altogether. Despite the representation of Jake as having sexual desire, however, it is limited because of his discomfort with his body.

The next man that Jake becomes involved with further exemplifies Jake's discomfort with his genitalia. When Jake tells Michael about Connor—his new 'beau'—Jake explains that Connor is "totally hot for" Buck Angel, a transman and porn star (*Michael Tolliver Lives* 162) who is "real proud of his pussy" (*Michael Tolliver Lives* 163). Buck Angel is a "buff and tattooed . . . biker dude with a shaved head and a red mustache" (*Michael Tolliver Lives* 164) who "calls himself 'a real man with a real pussy'" (*Michael Tolliver Lives* 163). Buck Angel is an important figure in the narrative for several reasons. Firstly, his role as a porn star draws the reader's attention to the unrealistic sexual and bodily details often depicted in pornography. Secondly, Buck Angel represents a great deal of what Second Wave feminist movements aimed to achieve in terms of sexual liberation and the objectification and commodification of women's bodies. Buck Angel is a figure that celebrates body positivity and promotes queer sexuality. Furthermore, the porn star's name conveys not only the idea of monetary exchange (a buck as in a dollar) but also a conjoined sense of the masculine

American hero with angelic femininity. Overall, Buck Angel's name works to strengthen the series' messages of hybridity and multiplicity. Finally, and most importantly, Connor's obsession with Buck Angel allows Jake space to contextualise his own preferences in alignment with his identity.

Jake demonstrates anxiety about what Connor's expectations of him might be when considering Connor's interests in the proudly incongruent porn star. Jake tells Michael that "I don't wanna get fucked." Jake gave me a bleak little smile. 'At least not *there*'" (*Michael* 163; italics in original). Jake's comment demonstrates that he is interested in sex but prefers for it to not involve his vagina. His initial insistence on not wanting to get fucked carries the implication that he might not want to occupy a passive or submissive position during sex, which might be thought of as the 'feminine' position. However, by saying "[a]t least not *there*," Jake demonstrates that his interest in sex is not so much to do with an anxiety about *receiving*; it is more to do with *where* this receiving takes place; in other words, he is suggesting an openness to other forms of penetration such as anal or oral but would rather his vagina not be involved.

In a conversation that follows between Michael and Anna, he tells her that "Jake says he can't relate to his vagina, that it's basically . . . a foreign object to him. To use it having sex with his boyfriend would be like . . . denying his essential masculinity" (*Michael Tolliver Lives* 168; ellipses in original). This idea that Jake using his vagina during a sexual act would deny his essential masculinity is problematic. These are not Jake's words, however, but Michael's interpretation of Jake's identity. If using one's vagina for sexual pleasure denies one's essential masculinity, this implies that identity is rooted in biology, a position refuted by many scholars in the fields of transgender, queer and feminist theory. Yet, this problematic assertion is readily subverted – first by the oppositionality of Jake compared with Buck Angel, who demonstrates that one's genitalia does not have to be congruent with one's

identity, and then by Anna, who, although arguing that she was not “especially attached to [her penis]” (*Michael Tolliver Lives* 169), insists that “some kids today are perfectly content to do without the surgery. They figure that gender is mostly in the head anyway, so why tamper with the parts that are specifically designed for pleasure?” (*Michael* 169). Anna further explains that “[t]he point is, dear . . . to me it wasn’t about sex or pleasure or any of those lovely things. It was about identity. And completion. I couldn’t feel complete with what I’d been given. It just wasn’t possible. I imagine Jake feels the same way” (*Michael* 169; ellipses in original).

Despite her own position, Anna argues for the benefit of not undergoing surgery: “[w]hy not let your head have the last word and leave your groin to enjoy itself? That way . . . if you were born female, say, like Jake . . . you don’t end up with . . . you know . . . some unfortunate, unfeeling—” (*Michael* 169; ellipses in original). Here, Michael offers a term of Jake’s: “Frankenpecker” (169). This term recalls Susan Stryker’s article (originally a performance piece), “My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix”, in which Stryker insists that “I find a deep affinity between myself as a transsexual woman and the monster in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*” (238). It is possible to argue that Jake experiences a similar affinity. Stryker notes that “[i]t is commonplace of literary criticism to note that Frankenstein’s monster is his own dark, romantic double, the alien Other he constructs and upon which he projects all he cannot accept in himself” (238). In referring to his non-existent phallus as a “Frankenpecker,” Jake reflects his own feelings of otherness and early lack of self-acceptance. At the same time as he embraces surgery (his mastectomy and eventual hysterectomy), he presents an aversion to “flesh torn apart and sewn together again in a shape other than that in which it was born” (Stryker 238) when it comes to his genitals. Thus, Jake conveys a tension between his need for ‘completion’ and a fear of not being able to experience pleasure. These are important complexities rarely accounted for in many

contemporary popular representations of trans\* identity. It is significant that this text cautions about the risks of losing the ability to feel pleasure following surgical transition, especially for transmen, for whom it is more difficult, medically speaking, to create a phallus. I have emphasised before that it is the right of every individual to choose how they want to shape their bodies—medically or otherwise—but self-acceptance and the right to experience full pleasure and desire are equally fundamental rights for human beings. Jake’s journey through his sexual identity and relationships is therefore important not only for offering a sex-positive perspective but also for emphasising that trans\* does not necessarily equate to desirelessness or undesirability.

The next man that Jake becomes involved with is in the eighth novel, *Mary Ann in Autumn*. Jonah is a repressed homosexual Mormon visiting San Francisco on missionary work concerning Proposition 8. Prop 8, as it is informally referred to in the book, was a constitutional amendment passed in the 2008 California state elections that eliminated the rights of same-sex couples to marry. It is significant that Jonah occupies this space of tension between his identity and two of the most historically oppressive systems of patriarchy—the law and religion—since he demonstrates that you cannot fight who you are (even though he tries very hard to do so). In *Transgender Warriors*, Leslie Feinberg demonstrates how both secular and religious law have been shaped over the years by figures and groups who sought to strengthen patriarchal inheritance and rule. The writings of Deuteronomy, the early Catholic Church and the repressive laws of Ancient Rome have all played a role in the oppression of women, trans\* people and homosexuals. In fact, the Roman body of law known as the *Corpus Juris Civilis* was later used as the foundation for religious and secular law in Europe, England and the United States (Feinberg, *Warriors* 64). It is unsurprising that Jonah struggles so much to embrace his homosexuality – he has the weight of both religious and secular law on his shoulders, pressuring him to conform to conventional heteronormativity.

Even though Jonah and Jake do not have a sexual relationship, their desire for one another is clear throughout *Mary Ann in Autumn* and the connection they build has a significant impact on both men. For Jonah, this relationship contributes to his eventual departure from the closet, a full embracing of his identity and the liberation of his sexual desire. Through getting to know Jonah, Jake's masculinity is affirmed, his status as a sexual being who experiences desire and is desired after is affirmed and he can move towards a space of self-acceptance.

Jake's sexual forays and relationships contribute to a sense of self and becoming. Like Michael, Jonah plays an important role in the narrative in terms of affirming Jake's masculinity. Jonah tells Jake that “[y]ou’re one of the manliest guys I’ve ever met. Not just in appearance but . . . your manly heart and your compassion. You’re the real thing, dude. You’re man enough for any woman” (125; ellipses in original). Jonah's insistence that Jake is “man enough for any woman,” is an irony the reader can enjoy; the reader understands that Jake is consistently attracted to men (both cis and trans) and is comfortable in his sexuality. Jonah's assumption that he can ‘turn’ Jake or ‘fix’ him is futile since the reader understands that Jake, as a transman, clearly was not man enough for the woman he was expected to be when he was assigned female at birth. Furthermore, it is possible that Jake can sway Jonah's way of thinking more than Jonah will have success in ‘converting’ Jake. Jake's influence on Jonah is confirmed in the final novel, *The Days of Anna Madrigal*, upon the reader's discovery that Dust Puppy, the man Michael and Ben have had a threesome with is, in fact, Jonah.

When Jake finds out Jonah is returning home to Arizona, Jake tells him that “you’re gonna hafta take cold showers from now on . . . So don’t plan on any emergency boners” (259). When Jonah insists that “I never plan on it, dude” (259), Jake tells him that it is “[f]unny how that works . . . Almost like it’s natural, huh? Like it’s who you are, and there’s

nothing you can do about it. And it's not just about your dick, either. It's about who you are inside, and what you need to be happy” (259). This remark leads to the two men making out:

[t]hey stayed that way for a while, Jonah's soft lips nestling in Jake's beard while his tongue foraged for something he seemed to have wanted for a long time. Jake gave it to him, too – not because he required anything more but because he wouldn't settle for anything less. It was a turning point for both of them, and it deserved recognition.  
(260)

Jonah's and Jake's kiss is a turning point for them both because, for Jonah, it is a step closer to embracing his identity and his desires and, for Jake, it is affirmation that he is desirable: “[f]or Jake, it was enough to know that another man had desired him enough to risk everything – even the promise of everlasting life – for a kiss” (294). Although their brief relationship does not extend beyond this single kiss, it plays a significant role in consolidating Jake's ability to desire and be desired after in the future.

In the final book in the series Jake tells his partner Amos more about his brief time with Jonah. At this point in the narrative, Amos “slipped his hand between Jake's legs and pulled him closer . . . His fingers found Jake's clit and rolled it idly, speculatively, like a pebble he'd just discovered on the beach” (158). Jake tells Amos about the deal he had with Jonah: “[n]either one of us wanted to get naked. He didn't want to go all the way with a fag, and I didn't want him to see my *vagine*” (159; italics in original). Amos replies by saying “[h]e doesn't know what he was missing” (159). Even after only a few short years since seeing Jonah, Jake's comfort with his own body has improved significantly. Perhaps some of this comfort might be attributed to his hysterectomy. Or perhaps Jake's increased comfort could be because he has found “someone who would hold him close and treat him as the same rough creature without effort or delusion” (150). However, it is also possible that Jake's

brief time with Jonah prepared him to be sexually open with Amos. The fact that Amos can slip his hand in Jake's pants and play with his clitoris reveals Jake's improved comfort with his own genitals as well as with Amos. Furthermore, his reference to his 'vagine' is a significant difference to 'that thing,' which he initially used to describe his vagina when he first met Michael. 'Vagine,' although euphemistic in its French variation, also lends a degree of exoticness to Jake's identity, thus emphasising that, by the ninth book in the series, Jake has embraced more of a position of hybridity and self-acceptance. In his coupledness with Amos, Jake has neither need to disclose his identity nor establish bodily boundaries. Jake is more open and playful than he used to be, which implies that perhaps he is more willing to explore different forms of pleasure with Amos.

#### *Affirming Identity through Desire and Sexuality*

Armistead Maupin's *Tales of the City* series is an excellent example of the way in which trans\* characters can be represented in fiction in a way that affirms their place in the world as sexual beings. Anna's relationships demonstrate that there is no limit in terms of gender, sexual orientation or age when it comes to being a person who experiences desire and is an object of desire. Jake's relationships demonstrate that, with time and experience, it is possible to reach a space of self-acceptance. Both these characters prove that there is always room for more queer – as seen with the identification of Stratos as a lesbian and Jake's interest in both cisgender and trans men. After reading so many contemporary popular narratives that close down queer sexual possibility and restrict the transgender to negative tropes—such as repetitive feelings of self-hatred that stem from being in the 'wrong' body—Jake's and Anna's narratives offer a refreshing alternative to discourses about trans\* identity and experience. In contrast to the many characters in contemporary popular fiction representations of queer gender identities whose transitions can inhibit sexual desire,

Maupin's transgender characters find their sexual confidence *through* their transition journeys, by shaping their bodies, presenting in their affirmed identities and remaining open to desire. In the *Tales* series, being transgender means neither being perverse for having a sexual life nor being without desire. These characters are not only granted a humanising sexual autonomy but are also afforded more complexity, since it is through understanding Anna's and Jake's perspectives about their bodies in relation to sexual desire that the reader is better able to understand their identities and what it means to be transgender.

Although the *Tales* series indulges in some of the safe and conventional tropes critiqued in Part One, for the most part it presents a positive, identity-affirming message about what it means to be transgender. Maupin affords Anna strength, agency and capability – she is too majestic to be rendered a victim. As for Jake, he either passes too well or spends too much time in domestic comfort and safety to become a target for victimisation. Jake conforms to a few problematic tropes, however; for instance, his feelings of anxiety and not belonging reinforce the messages of pathologisation at work in the texts analysed in Part One. In Jake's case, his social anxiety reflects the way in which patriarchal values concerning the division of society into binary, congruent gender can shape places into unaccommodating spaces for those people whose identities disrupt that binary. Great potential could have come from Jake and his friends entering social space – their queer identities and expressions could challenge societal preoccupations with gender stereotypes and expectations by informing that space with their bodies. Regardless of these shortcomings in the text, the *Tales* series is a positive celebration of difference. Anna, especially, is revered in a way that can be seen to resemble the historical reverence held towards trans\* people in matrilineal societies before class divisions split society and established patriarchal rule and oppression (Feinberg, *Warriors* 47). Anna is like a goddess – she is venerated not only by her fellow characters but

by the text itself. Her character, in particular, reflects the diverse potential that comes with queer gender identity.

Diversity is celebrated in Maupin's *Tales*. His approach to queer representation is shaped by his own identity as a gay man and, although he is still an 'outsider' in writing about transgender identity and experience, he does share a kind of related knowledge. He understands the value of queer community, the kinds of shapes that alternative families can take and the importance of coming out. He expresses an important perspective about hybridity and provides valuable insights to the workings of desire in queer relationships. Although *The Tales of the City* series, overall, offers refreshing alternatives to many of the pathologising tropes and conventions that dominate the contemporary popular trans\* fiction market, there are aspects of the series that are limited and problematic – the theme of completion, for instance, and the way Jake's anxiety restricts him to domestic space. Maupin takes risks and lets his characters consider the complex and challenging questions that come with queer gender but these questions only start to scrape the surface of what it means to be trans\* or have nonconforming gender.

The thesis celebrates the series' avoidance of pathologising tropes such as trans\* harassment and abuse but, realistically, this is only possible because of the way the series' transgender characters conform to dominant gender expectations and perform their genders in such a way as to 'pass' among heteronormative, cisgender society. Although the series demonstrates that one does not necessarily have to conform fully to societal expectations of a 'complete' gender, it prioritises the value of congruence through surgery and gender performativity. Yet, subversive elements function to unsettle such dominant ideologies. Maupin argues that it is possible to be a man with a vagina, a woman with a penis, a woman who identifies across multiple genders or a man who is in touch with his feminine side. For Maupin, gender identity is not limited to a singular category. *Tales* highlights that gender can

be hybrid and androgynous. Furthermore, being transgender does not necessarily mean being a victim of violence, harassment and abuse. In this series, being transgender is presented as staying true to oneself, challenging conventions and expectations concerning gender stereotypes, shaping one's own space and building one's own family. Transgender means the opportunity for new beginnings, growing up and being who you are.

### Part Three: *The Passion of New Eve and Orlando: A Biography*

The American literary critic Irving Howe writes that Modernism is characterised by “a dynamism of asking and of learning not to reply. The past was devoted to answers, the modern period confines itself to questions” (50). The texts I examine in Part One of this thesis, although being contemporary popular genre fictions, occupy a position similar to the literary past to which Howe refers, insofar as they are committed to answers. These texts seek to make their meanings as accessible as possible to the reader and they achieve this through traditional, plot-driven, chronological narrative, ‘safe’ content, and straight-forward language techniques. Where Maupin’s *Tales* both disrupts and conforms to genre and convention, the texts analysed in Part Three disrupt generic literary classifications altogether, which allows for an opening up, an asking, rather than an answering of questions. They do not engage in just one or two genres but take what they like from a wide variety of genres. They reimagine and recreate literary traditions, setting out to do things differently, instead of conforming to existing patterns of storytelling.

In this section, I delve into two texts from two significant eras in the twentieth century: Modernism and postmodernism. These are texts that focus on questions, use complex language techniques, evoke challenging content, refuse definition, and defy literary conventions. They do not seek to please or conform and can, at times, be confronting and uncomfortable. Since the texts selected for this part of the thesis are ones that defy singular classification, they cannot be thought of solely as either Modernist or postmodernist. These lenses are helpful for interrogating how these texts utilise a combination of classically Modernist tropes—such as fragmentation, denying answers and defying tradition—and postmodernist conventions—such as paradox, unreliable narration, parody and dark

humour—to provide a commentary on the construction, performance, fluidity and multiplicity of gender.

In Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve* (1977) and Virginia Woolf's *Orlando: An Autobiography* (1928), the narratives consciously challenge the nature of gender identity, performance and expectations. Where the contemporary texts analysed in Part One seek to comfort, console and provide tidy resolutions, the texts analysed in this section project the queer into more complex territory, instead aiming to challenge and dismantle dominant ideologies concerning gender, identity, desire and literary tradition. Like Parts One and Two, the chapters that follow are organised thematically and will investigate how these more complex texts narrate identity, encounter desire, establish ideas of rebirth and use dark themes. The texts examined in Part One, in using these themes to evoke sympathy in the reader for the plight of queer-gendered individuals attempting to live in a heteronormative, cisgendered world, tend to rely on tropes and conventions that reinforce hegemonic standards of binary, conformative gender. Many of these texts resort to gender stereotyping and situate their queer protagonists as conforming to societal expectations of femininity and masculinity. The texts analysed in Part Two achieve more subversion than the popular fictions examined in Part One; however, these texts also demonstrate limitations with their use of tropes that situate trans\* in the context of ideologies concerning gender congruence, conformity, consistency and completion.

Woolf and Carter, by contrast, approach the themes surrounding transition in significantly different ways to the novels analysed previously, projecting the reader's conventional understandings of gender into complex territory. *The Passion of New Eve* and *Orlando: An Autobiography* are texts that deconstruct and challenge dominant ideologies. They are edgy and experimental feminist texts that subvert and unsettle hegemonic understandings of gender, literary tradition and patriarchy. These are texts that encounter the

process of gender transition in significantly different ways not only from the texts analysed in Parts One and Two but also from one another. Woolf's *Orlando* situates transition as spontaneous, fantastical and accepted by the central character. Carter's *Passion*, by contrast, presents transition as a shockingly violent and traumatic experience performed without the recipient's consent. In this part of the thesis, I first discuss the whirligig of literary conventions that Angela Carter adopts in *The Passion of New Eve* (1977) to raise questions about the construction of femininity, gender and myth, before turning to examine how Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928) interrogates the process of gender identity acquisition in relation to societal expectations of gender roles and performance as well as ideas of fluidity and multiplicity. Establishing *The Passion of New Eve* within the discourses of Second Wave Feminism, the context of Carter's feminism and transgender theory, the first chapter analyses the construction and performance of femininity in *Passion*, examining the way it operates to disturb and discomfort, particularly through the central character, Eve/lyn<sup>3</sup>, and the reclusive film star, Tristessa. The second chapter examines how Eve/lyn's rebirth is situated within the context of technology and mythology.

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<sup>3</sup> In *The Passion of New Eve*, the central character is referred to as 'Evelyn' throughout the first half of the novel, while he is a man, and is called 'Eve' once she becomes a woman for the second half of the novel. I choose to refer to the central character as 'Eve/lyn' to reflect and emphasise zir composite and multiple identity. I also use the pronouns 'zie,' 'zem,' 'zir,' 'zirs' and 'zemsself' to the same effect.

Chapter 9:  
Constructing Femininity:  
Angela Carter's "Feminist Tract"

The shift here from Maupin's *Tales of the City* series to Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve* (1977) is significant, since the first novel in Maupin's series is initially published only a year after the publication of Carter's text. Both texts are of their era, insofar as they engage with the politics of the time. However, each approaches different spheres of sociocultural ideology in different ways. Where Maupin begins his series with a particular focus on promoting the visibility and acceptance of male homosexuality and later shifts to arguments concerning the transgender, Carter focuses predominantly on Second Wave feminist discourses, using the transgender to critique the cultural construction and commodification of femininity. Where Maupin provides witty commentary on and challenges to hegemonic understandings of gender and sexuality, Carter offers dramatic deconstruction and subversion of gender ideologies. A shared engagement with sexual liberation characterises both Maupin's writing and Carter's but their approaches differ. Where Maupin demonstrates more preoccupation with presenting homosexuality to a straight audience to encourage their acceptance, sympathy and understanding, Carter's interest in sexuality is more confronting and disturbing. The impetus at work in her writing is not to placate, like Maupin tends to do, but to unsettle.

Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve* (1977) is a confronting, experimental text that draws on multiple literary genres and allusions to offer a commentary on the construction and performance of gender and femininity. Carter engages with and deconstructs ideas of feminine masquerade, setting out to write "a feminist tract about the social creation of femininity" (Carter, "Notes" 71). As a postmodernist, feminist text, *Passion* deconstructs conventional understandings of gender, transgender and literary form. Through its complication of binaries, Carter's text adopts discourses of hybridity and multiplicity to

reflect gender identity as a complex process that is at once individual, social and cultural. The significant distinction between this text and the other representations of queer gender examined in this thesis is the fact that the central character's sex change, and corresponding transition, is forced, rather than elective.

In their introduction to *The Infernal Desires of Angela Carter*, Joseph Bristow and Trev Lynn Broughton suggest that *The Passion of New Eve* is “an astute narrative that explores how transsexuality holds the clue to the constructedness of all gendered identities” (4). The word ‘trans,’ meaning to ‘cross,’ opens the possibility of transcending binaries and boundaries. This movement demonstrates the malleability of gender and all the forms it can take. This section begins with an overview of Second Wave Feminism and the phenomenon of political correctness. It then offers a critique of Carter's style and thinking—as well as scholars' responses to her work—drawing on performance theory to examine how Carter's “feminist tract” about the construction of femininity promotes ideas of multiplicity and complexity across gendered identities.

### Second Wave Feminism and Political Correctness

Angela Carter was writing *The Passion of New Eve* during a significant period in feminist history. Second Wave Feminism began in the United States in the 1960s and spread around the Western world, lasting for about two decades. Unfolding in the context of the anti-war and civil rights movements, the catalyst for Second Wave Feminism was Betty Friedan's 1963 book, *The Feminine Mystique*, which was inspired by Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) and criticised the belief that a woman's role was simply to marry and bear children. The feminist movement took off, focusing on public and private injustices, such as reproductive rights, domestic violence, equal pay and workplace harassment.

Different branches of feminism emerged, including radical feminism, which focused on the complete elimination of male supremacy and challenging of all gender roles. Socialist Feminism, like Marxism, acknowledged the oppressive nature of a capitalist society and saw a connection between gender and racial discrimination. The sexual revolution was a central focus at the onset of the movement, affording significant changes to legislation and social attitudes to female sexuality. Overall, Second Wave feminists realised that women's cultural and political inequalities were inextricably linked. Although different groups and different agendas emerged, and different nations had stronger focuses in some spheres than others, women's liberationists fought with a similar focus on actions to change perceptions of women's roles in society, to reform laws and to address patriarchy and class-based struggle. They worked under a unifying goal of social equality, with sexuality and reproductive rights being central concerns. A widespread effort worked to reform the negative and inferior image of women in popular culture to a more positive and realistic one. Women created their own popular culture and the movement spread through feminist films, music, books and other mediums.

It is possible to see how Carter was influenced by different modes of feminist thought throughout the Second Wave movement. Eve/lyn's perceptions of Leyla, for instance, the dark-skinned working girl of New York, reveals the misogynist and patriarchal values that liberationists of the era were fighting to change. That Eve/lyn blames Leyla for her pregnancy, suggesting that it is her responsibility to swallow a pill or administer some other form of contraception, demonstrates an oppressive attitude. In the States, the sexual revolution led to the approval of the contraceptive pill by the Food and Drug Administration in 1960 and gave women more control over their reproductive rights. Eve/lyn's attitude of blame is petty; as if women, by being afforded the freedom to choose to take a pill, must be

required to take it. Zir attitude is reflective of wider patriarchal attitudes that persist in depicting women as inferior to men.

The larger discourse at work in Carter's novel concerns the cultural production and commodification of femininity. The socialist aspect of Feminism interested in changing perceptions and understandings of gender roles is aware of the impacts of popular culture, including media representations, on understandings of femininity. Although many of these social changes are targeted at understandings of women's roles in relation to family, husbandry and domestic space, Carter uses theories of masquerade in relation to hyperfeminine representations on screen to further discourses about the construction of gender. Although understandings of gender performance can be traced back to Joan Riviere's 1929 essay on masquerade, it was not until the early 1970s that a defined distinction was offered between sex and gender. The differentiation between sex and gender began to be widely recognised by feminists from the early 1970s, which paves the way for later debates to emerge in the fields of queer and transgender studies.

Many scholars acknowledge that Carter's work pre-empts much significant theory to come in the fields of gender, sexuality and feminism, especially that of Judith Butler. Angela Carter's work "anticipated by several years two of the most urgent feminist debates to develop in the 1980s and 1990s: first, the role of pornography as either liberatory or oppressive; and second, the construction of gender as a scripted performance" (Bristow and Broughton 2). Carroll argues that the recurring motif across contemporary scholarship of Tristessa's masquerade as a woman stems from a great deal of Second Wave feminist debate about feminine appropriation. Referencing the work of Jay Prosser and Judith/Jack Halberstam, Carroll argues that "to read the transgender subjects in *The Passion of New Eve* simply as queer tropes of gender performativity is to risk overlooking the complex – and often fraught – history of the relationship between feminism and transgender" ("Woman"

65). In 1979, Janice G. Raymond made the provocative claim that “[a]ll transsexuals rape women’s bodies” (104). Radical feminist viewpoints such as this highlight the “wider context of ideas and actions at work within some branches of the Second Wave of the women’s movement” (Carroll, “Woman” 71). Carter was a feminist and a deconstructionist but not necessarily a radical feminist. “What stops Carter ever looking like a radical feminist,” Kaveney argues, “is a sense of irony and perspective, and the complexity that lends her” (182).

Many critics have analysed Carter’s literary style to understand and explain *how* her work achieves such complexity. Some theorists align her work with postmodernism because of her refusal to distinguish between high art and popular art and that which is private and that which belongs to everyone. “Like other ‘very capable modern authors’, Carter was postmodernist in being ‘good at having it both ways’” (H. Lee 308; Bayley 516). It is with an approach of multiplicity that Carter brings complexity to her exploration of femininity and genders in transition. Yet, she has also been critiqued for relying on political correctness, which John Bayley argues “is a common factor in the elusive category of the postmodernist novel” (518). Bayley insists that “whatever spirited arabesques and feats of descriptive imagination Carter may perform she always comes to rest in the right ideological position” (518). Hermione Lee challenges Bayley, arguing that “[i]f you now want to dismiss a feminist author, you can make her sound rigid and intolerant by giving her the ‘PC’ label” (313).

Political correctness, especially in the United States, “is identified as a tyranny born out of sixties radicalism” (H. Lee 311-2). It has arisen from “the old libertarian movements for individualism, sexual freedom and recognition for oppressed minorities . . . bold avant-gardism . . . and . . . deconstruction in literary criticism” (H. Lee 312). The resultant political repression and censorship that has emerged from social pressure to “clean up your language

to keep pace with the claims of every interest group” (312) shares an alarming alignment with George Orwell’s *1984*, where the restriction of language is used not only to keep people from speaking freely but also to repress thought and individual autonomy. Lee insists that political correctness “may be for good ends, but it makes for a pious and humourless language” (313). Unsurprisingly, most of the texts I examine in Part One use the language of political correctness – these are texts that consciously put themselves in the “right ideological position” (Bayley 518); however, this ideological position is often to do with accepting people for who they are and teaching cisgender readers what they should and should not say to people with queer genders. This position is well and good – it is important to respect others’ differences; however, out of fear of being judged and found wanting, some authors lean too heavily on political correctness in ways that limit possibilities for complexity.

In 1992, Stanley Fish wrote on the necessity of regulating ‘hate speech,’ of either allowing or policing the flow of discourse. Fish argues that, in order not to “permit speech that does obvious harm,” speech must be shut off “in ways that might deny us the benefit of Joyce’s *Ulysses* or Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterly’s Lover* or Titian’s paintings” (H. Lee 319-20; Fish 114-5). Fish identifies the losses that can occur in art and expression when censorship and the restriction of free speech take precedence. Angela Carter is clearly unconcerned about political correctness; she writes to challenge and deconstruct the hegemonic orders and ideological structures that govern society and literary convention. She uses elements of postmodernism and poststructuralism to approach her writing with multiplicity, to express “the mutability of individuality” (Kaveney 172) and convey the idea that “no meanings are fixed, given or natural” (Hanson 60). In adopting a multiplicity of narrative conventions, language techniques and modes of expression, *The Passion of New Eve* is perhaps “Carter’s most anti-essentialist text” (Brizolakis 50). Carter’s text seeks to challenge the essentialisation of femininity through discourses of construction and performance.

### Constructing Femininity: Carter's "Feminist Tract"

In "Notes from the Front Line," Carter claims that she conceived *The Passion of New Eve* "as a feminist tract about the social creation of femininity, among other things" (71). Many theorists express opposing views about Carter's literary agenda. Linden Peach argues that "Carter as a female author is appropriating a male consciousness to expose how women are trapped . . . in a male imaginary" (111), suggesting that "the narrative technique of ventriloquism – a female author speaking in a male voice – is employed not just to create pornography but an essentially sadistic version of it" (111). Carter's experimentation with transgressive topics such as pornography, rape, desire, gender, sex and sexuality have led to contentious views about her feminist standpoint.

Paulina Palmer, in her chapter "Gender as Performance," references Mother's (the self-proclaimed goddess and leader of the sub-desert, all-female civilisation of Beulah) experiments to create a "perfect specimen of womanhood" (Carter, *Passion* 65), arguing that "[t]he portrayal of Mother and the radical feminist community she rules is an anti-feminist caricature, illustrating the misogyny and heterosexism to which Carter, in her wish to challenge the reader's preconceptions about gender and create sexually provocative images, sometimes descends" (29). Palmer thus accuses Carter of engaging in similar practices that patriarchal society has employed to oppress women.

Carter's Beulah can indeed be seen as a radical inversion of the oppressive patriarchal system, with women repressing and using men for their own agendas. As "the Great Parricide" and the "Castratrix of the Phallocentric Universe," Mother claims that "Woman has been the antithesis in the dialectic of creation quite long enough" and her operation on Eve/lyn will "make a start on the feminisation of Father Time" (Carter 64). To read Carter's

representation of Mother and Beulah as a reflection of the author's misogyny and heterosexism is to dismiss the deeper complexity at work in *Passion*. Mother's use of violent and extreme methods to deconstruct and invert patriarchal order highlights the frustration and injustice that many women have experienced in relation to their oppression. If "one woman is all women" (55), Mother's rage can be thought of as the accumulation of every woman's rage and her actions are her attempt to find justice. Although this representation can be viewed as a commentary on the futility of extreme acts of radical feminism, Carter's positioning of Mother's revenge is not an act of misogyny so much as it is a critique of the oppressive structures that govern gender in society and situate women as passive objects. Moreover, the notion that Carter resorts to heterosexism to achieve this critique is undermined by Carter's later exploration of queer desire, which defies heteronormative, cisgender ideologies. Although Palmer presents Carter in an anti-feminist light, other critics argue that Carter can be nothing but feminist, given the subversive quality of her writing.

Alison Lee insists that "it is the heteroglossia, the multiplicity, the undermining of binaries that make a text like Carter's feminist in both its narrative structure and its story" (246-8). Similarly, Rachel Blau DuPlessis maintains that women writers

are feminist because they construct a variety of oppositional strategies to the depiction of gender institutions in narrative . . . the woman writer will create that further rupture . . . breaking the sequence – the expected order. (34)

Carter indeed constructs a multitude of oppositional strategies in her narrative that undermine binaries and not just ones to do with gender. Her use of binaries concerning motherhood and fatherhood, realness and falsehood, artificiality and naturalness operates to blur the distinctions between these categories. In this sense, while it is a feminist agenda that drives her narrative, her writing can also be read as queer insofar as it disrupts expectations

concerning gender and sexuality as well as literary convention. This disruption is most obvious in Carter's positioning of Eve/lyn's sex change as enforced, rather than elective, which subverts literary expectations and opens a complex space in which to interpret the construction and performance of gender.

Since the increased prominence of gender performance theory in the 1990s, theorists of Carter frequently reference the work of Judith Butler to illustrate how Carter critiques sociocultural productions and processes of femininity. Butler emphasises that the illusion of gender is "discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality" (*Gender Trouble* 136). Butler's theories confirm Carter's suspicions that identity, especially gender identity, is not only something that can be constructed—much like a novel and the characters within it—but that identity is also something with the capacity to evolve and encompass multiple spaces. Carter reflects these ideas through the construction of her narrative.

Alison Lee argues that *The Passion of New Eve* is made up of a plethora of labyrinths in terms of narrative content and "at the heart of each labyrinth is something that seems to be a center or a culmination but is in fact a dual, if not multiple, being: Leilah, Mother, and Tristessa. But centers fluctuate: Leilah becomes Lilith, Mother goes mad, Tristessa is revealed to be male and female" (244-6). Lee identifies that Carter does not seek to please her readers by containing her characters within the realm of safety, singularity and simplicity. Sarah Gamble identifies that

the elaborate games that Carter plays with gender identity in this text means that the nature of both femininity and masculinity is subject to critique, with the result that the novel is therefore resistant to simplistic analyses which seek to interpret it as a female wish-fulfilment fantasy. (90)

It is impossible to read Carter's work according to a single lens and one must read how others have read Carter's work with a degree of scepticism. It is with this scepticism, therefore, that I shift to interpretations of the transgender and performances of femininity.

### Interpreting the Transgender, Performing Femininity

The transgender as subject holds great potential to disrupt hegemonic expectations and stereotypes concerning gender. Sandy Stone writes that

[i]n the transsexual as text we may find the potential to map the refigured body onto conventional gender discourse and thereby disrupt it, to take advantage of the dissonances created by such a juxtaposition to fragment and reconstitute the elements of gender in new and unexpected geometries. (231)

Taking advantage of the dissonances created by juxtaposition is precisely what Carter does to deconstruct gender. However, a problematic trope has occurred from reading gender as performance. In *Second Skins*, Jay Prosser elaborates on how the transgender subject has been presented as a "key queer trope" (5) which serves to aid queer theory's "aptly skewed point of entry into the academy" (22). In her chapter "'She Had Never Been a Woman,'" Rachel Carroll explains that "[t]he transgender figure, it seems, has come to stand for queer theory and, hence, the presence of transgender themes within a literary text has sometimes been read as shorthand for queer intent" ("Woman" 65). To argue that Carter wrote with 'queer intent' is to overlook both her feminist agenda and the complexity of her work. Carter uses the transgender to discuss the sociocultural construction of femininity and the patriarchal oppression of women. I, however, position the queer content of her novel as an outcome of her refusal to essentialise and simplify: the queer in Carter's novel is an effect of the complexity with which she wrote and thought.

In *The Passion of New Eve*, Tristessa is a transgender, old-Hollywood movie star famous for her representations of tragic, suffering women. Carter uses this character to interrogate the construction, performance and commodification of femininity. In interview with John Haffenden, Carter states that

[i]n *The Passion of New Eve* the central character is a transvestite movie star, and I created this person in order to say some quite specific things about the cultural production of femininity. The promotion slogan for the film *Gilda* [Dir. Charles Vidor, 1946], starring Rita Hayworth, was “There never was a woman like Gilda”, and that may have been why I made my Hollywood star a transvestite, a man, because only a man could think of femininity in terms of that slogan . . . there is quite a careful and elaborate discussion of femininity as a commodity, of Hollywood producing illusions as tangible commodities. (86)

Here, Carter’s overt references to Tristessa as a ‘transvestite’ and a ‘man’ invite the kinds of readings that interpret the “revelation of Tristessa’s sexed body as the ‘exposure’ of Tristessa as a ‘male cross-dresser’ rather than as a transgender woman” (Carroll, “Woman” 76). Yet, Carter also refers to Tristessa as her “central character.” Perhaps one could call Tristessa *a* central character, but she is not *the* central character – Eve/lyn is.

Perhaps it is due to Carter’s “edgy refusal to please” (H. Lee 311) or the way her writing pushes its readers to “examine one’s own received ideas” (Warner 255) that Carter makes such contradictions. In doing so, she enables readers to reconsider understandings of gender as inherent, congruent, binary and conformative. When Carter calls Tristessa a “transvestite,” a “man” and “the central character,” perhaps she is refusing to essentialise her characters and instead inviting her readers to question Tristessa’s identity and interrogate the

phenomenon of gender itself. Yet, many critics easily accept and reinforce descriptions of the Hollywood movie star as ‘transvestite’ and ‘cross-dresser.’

“[A] recurring motif in scholarship on this novel is the interpretation of the revelation of Tristessa’s sexed body as the ‘exposure’ of Tristessa as a ‘male cross-dresser’ rather than as a transgender woman” (Carroll, “Woman” 76). Claire Westall refers to Tristessa as “the former Hollywood starlet exposed as a transvestite” (132), Makinen proclaims that “Tristessa is in fact a male cross-dresser who has no experience whatsoever of being a real woman” (157) and Rubenstein insists that Tristessa is “unmask[ed] as a transvestite who has successfully disguised his male sex” (107). Many interpretations of Tristessa elect to see her as a ‘false’ woman, as a man appropriating femininity. Yet, these notions of ‘realness’ and ‘falsity’ are problematic, especially if the idea of a ‘real’ woman is based on a person’s ontological status. In the opening of Carter’s *Passion*, the text contemplates how “[o]ur external symbols must always express the life within us with absolute precision,” asking “how could they do otherwise, since that life has generated them?” (Carter 2). In applying this reasoning to gender, it is possible to argue that external symbols, such as stylisations of the body, represent an inherent sense of interiority. Yet, if one follows Butler’s reasoning that these external signifiers “congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural source of being” (*Gender Trouble* 33), then perhaps it is not life that generates symbols but symbols that generate life. In understanding that “[r]eality is fabricated as an interior essence” and that external signifiers “create the illusion of an interior and organising gender core” (136), it is possible to see how *The Passion of New Eve* navigates the complex terrain of gender identity. For, once Eve/lyn receives zir sex change, it is not until zie has adopted and enacted the external signifiers of femininity that zie starts to identify as a woman. The construction and performance of both Eve/lyn’s and Tristessa’s femininity

reveal the construction and performance of all genders, thus critiquing the dominant ideologies that reinforce patriarchal gender values.

Heather Johnson, in her chapter “Unexpected Geometries,” argues that “Tristessa reproduces the relation of a male artist to an objectified female subject. He fetishizes parts of his own body in a way accurately characteristic of the male transvestite” (172). In terms of Laura Mulvey’s theories about the ‘male gaze,’ Johnson’s description of Tristessa works in the context of “a world ordered by sexual imbalance” in which “pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female” (Mulvey 19). Evidence of this relationship can be witnessed in Carter’s text with the notion that Tristessa “had been the perfect man’s woman” (125) and “had made himself the shrine of his own desires” (125). However, to depict Tristessa merely as a transvestite or cross-dresser is to both misunderstand her identity and overlook the wider complexity at work in this character. Johnson offers definitions of ‘transvestite’ and ‘transsexual’ to clarify the distinctions she sees between Eve/lyn and Tristessa: “*transvestite* describes an occasional cross-dresser who experiences a temporary shift in gender identity and is often heterosexual in orientation; *transsexual* is someone who undergoes sexual reassignment surgery and fully identifies with the newly sexed body” (180; italics in original). These definitions are highly problematic in both general terms and the context of *The Passion of New Eve*.

First, Johnson’s description of ‘transvestite’ as “an occasional cross-dresser who experiences a temporary shift in gender identity” does not align with what can be understood about Tristessa in Carter’s novel. Tristessa is always described as wearing feminine clothes and “[t]here is no evidence in the narrative of *The Passion of New Eve* that Tristessa derives sexual satisfaction from dressing as a woman (as a transvestite might), nor that her ‘cross-dressing’ is temporary and provisional (whether for the purposes of pleasure or screen performance)” (Carroll, “Woman” 76). Tristessa expresses a consistent femininity that

maintains itself even when she is stripped of the external signifiers that represent it. The second point I take issue with, in Johnson's definitions, is the generalisation that transvestites are "often heterosexual in orientation." Although it is likely, as Carroll points out above, that sexual satisfaction may be one of the appealing aspects of cross-dressing, it ignores other potential reasons for why people might be attracted to drag or transvestism, such as gender-bending, freedom of expression, experimentation and sociocultural/political commentary.

The third and final point of contention in Johnson's definitions is the idea that a transsexual *fully* identifies with their newly sexed body. To view Eve/lyn as fully identifying with zir newly sexed body is to ignore the fact that zir surgery is not elective. Significantly, Tristessa's categorisation as 'transvestite' "is made by way of contrast with Eve/lyn, whose designation as a 'transsexual' is grounded in her sexed body rather than her gender identity" (Carroll, "Woman" 77). It is curious that so many scholars label Tristessa as 'transvestite' and Eve/lyn as 'transgender' when Tristessa is the one who seeks (and is denied) surgery and Eve/lyn is the one who has surgery forced upon zem. Although Eve/lyn assimilates into the role of a woman, it is not by choice. Viewed as a woman, the expectation that zie must perform femininity highlights a societal impetus that perpetuates dominant gender ideologies and regulates gender deviance.

Makinen asserts that "*The Passion of New Eve* clearly reveals that passive femininity is nothing but a male creation. Tristessa . . . presents himself as a spectacle for the audience's adoring gaze" (157). Roberta Rubenstein argues that the unmasking of Tristessa's "true biological sex" allows Carter to expose "the lie at the base of male romantic fantasies of femininity" (110). Indeed, for patriarchal culture to dominate, it relies heavily on women remaining in the realm of passivity and negativity. Positioning Tristessa as "too much of a woman" (Carter 169), as "the most beautiful woman in the world" (125) and as internalising patriarchal ideals of femininity, allows Carter to critique not just Tristessa's performance of

femininity but all performances of femininity as masquerade. Palmer argues that Tristessa “is discovered to be not a woman at all but a man masquerading in drag” (30). Although Tristessa’s hyper-femininity can be understood as a form of masquerade or drag, since her femininity is an exaggerated stereotype, this does not necessarily make her a man.

Luce Irigaray defines masquerade as the female enactment of male-orchestrated scripts and roles, which leads to women submitting “to the dominant economy of desire” (133). Brizolakis and Makinen both align Carter’s work with Joan Riviere’s essay “Womanliness as Masquerade,” insisting that a prominent degree of Carter’s thinking about gender performance stems from Riviere’s argument “that femininity is a masquerade that women choose to don so they can enter society, even though this mask has been designed by men” (Makinen 158). It is in this sense that Carter critiques the performances that all women play in conforming to patriarchal stereotypes of ideal femininity. Tristessa’s and Eve/lyn’s hyper-feminine performances reveal the ways in which all kinds of women (and other genders) can submit to the male economy of desire. In the context of Riviere’s thesis (and identifying it as a big influence on Carter’s writing) Makinen declares that “Tristessa’s cross-dressing is a male appropriation of femininity, not a radical form of gender bending” (158). In response to Makinen’s statement, Rachel Carroll asserts that “[h]ere, Tristessa is depicted as suffering from a form of false consciousness in succumbing to a ‘lie’ of femininity, but as a sexed male she is also regarded as an agent of male colonisation of female experience” (“Woman” 76). Reading Tristessa as a male coloniser of female experience aligns with the debates of trans-exclusionary radical feminists, who argue that trans women are not ‘real’ women. Yet, what defines a ‘real’ woman?

Eve/lyn asks similar questions in relation to the construction of gender:

what the nature of masculine and the nature of feminine might be, whether they involve male and female, if they have anything to do with Tristessa's so long neglected apparatus or my own fresh incision and engine-turned breasts, that I do not know. Though I have been both man and woman, still I do not know the answer to these questions. Still they bewilder me. (146)

In leaving these questions open, Carter invites the reader to contemplate their own answers. Just as Eve/lyn's breasts do not define her femininity, having a penis does not make Tristessa any less of a woman; she is a differently-sexed, feminine-identifying woman who subscribes to dominant stereotypes of femininity to present herself as a particular kind of woman, to give a specific performance of hyper-femininity. Mother's stipulation that Tristessa is "too much of a woman, already, for the good of the sex" (169) highlights the extent to which Tristessa internalises and performs problematic stereotypes of femininity. Eve/lyn notes that "[i]f a woman is indeed beautiful only in so far as she incarnates most completely the secret aspirations of man, no wonder Tristessa had been able to become the most beautiful woman in the world" (Carter *Passion* 125). The idea that Tristessa can only be the most beautiful woman in the world because she is a man demonstrates that dominant sociocultural understandings of femininity—whether enacted by women, men or people that identify between or outside this binary—are oppressive patriarchal constructions. The performance of ideals of femininity, particularly conscious performances that might be presented on a screen, situate femininity as a commodity for the pleasure and satisfaction of men. Carter thus establishes Tristessa's character as a critique of femininities that are constructed to gratify the 'male gaze'.

Tristessa's construction of a passive, lonely, objectified femininity reveals the fabrication involved in the expression of all gendered identities and performances as well as the illusion of authenticity itself. Eve/lyn asks, "[h]ow could a real woman ever have been so

much a woman as you?” (125). If Tristessa is more womanly than a ‘real’ woman, what makes a real woman? In understanding Baudrillard’s theories concerning simulation, the difference is inconsequential. For, in simulating a woman, Tristessa becomes a woman who is also simulated—Eve/lyn’s femininity is partially based on Tristessa’s—and in occupying these (un)realities simultaneously, she reveals that the difference between that which is simulated and that which simulates is nothing. If simulations occur, expectations of what the simulated is will never be clear-cut. The cycle of performance and masquerade continues with each artist shaping their expression according to their own beliefs, knowledge, expectations for their bodies, psychological predispositions and social environments. In this sense, femininity and masculinity must be understood as sociocultural constructions, with ideals differing based on each unique context in which they occur. Eve/lyn’s time living at Zero’s ranch house highlights the social processes that can influence the construction and performance of gender.

When Eve/lyn is captured and raped by Zero, then made to become his eighth wife, zie realises how zir survival depends on zir performance of femininity. When Zero throws Eve/lyn a marital ring to match those of his other wives, zie catches it “in a cricketer’s catch” and notes this automatic response as a betrayal of zir new flesh (Carter 89). Out of fear of what Zero would do to zem if he discovers that Eve/lyn used to be a sexed male, zie begins to consciously regulate zir masculine mannerisms and survey zir femininity in relation to that of Zero’s other wives:

when I was at home among the girls, I kept as silent as I could and tried to imitate the way they moved and the way they spoke for I knew that, in spite of Sophia’s training in Beulah, I would often make a gesture with my hands that was out of Eve’s character or exclaim with a subtly male inflection that made them raise their eyebrows. (Carter 97)

Eve/lyn's acknowledgement of zir feminine role—in "Eve's character"—highlights the consciously performative role required to 'pass' as a woman. Eve/lyn's practice of imitating the feminine expressions of the other women in Zero's harem leads zem to realise that, "although I was a woman, I was now passing for a woman, but, then, many women born spend their whole lives in just such imitations" (97). Eve/lyn's comment about the capacity for any woman to imitate femininity highlights the crucial message at work in Carter's novel: that femininity, like other expressions of gender, is not inherent but constructed and performed, whether consciously or subconsciously. Eve/lyn scrutinises the processes by which zie formulates zir own femininity, discovering that "the result of my apprenticeship as a woman was, of course, that my manner became a little too emphatically feminine" (97-8). In attempting to pass as a woman, Eve/lyn finds zemself in a space of hyper-femininity.

Zero's suspicion that Eve/lyn "might be too much of a woman for him" (98) leads to a series of inquisitive and punitive actions. By "some atavistic intuition," Zero realises that "[s]omething in [zem] rang false" (103) and conducts a full-body examination of Eve/lyn: "breasts, belly, the junction of the thighs, knees, feet, the gaps between the toes, everywhere" (103). Despite finding no physical evidence of Eve/lyn's surgical transformation, Zero remains certain that zie is 'false,' a notion that might not have been roused if Eve/lyn had not consciously regulated zir gender performance to such an extreme degree. Eve/lyn notes being "very much afraid in case he found a flaw in my disguise, that Mother might have left some unknown-to-me clue impressed in my new flesh that showed I'd been reupholstered and, a few short months before, just as much of a man as Zero" (103). This use of the term 'disguise' implies that, although Eve/lyn presents as a woman and possesses a congruently sexed body, zir identification as a man persists. When Zero finishes his inspection, Eve/lyn recognises that zir physical perfection not only puzzles Zero but also scares him, "so that now, to master his fear, he attacked me until I thought I would die of it, so furious were his

exertions” (104). Zero’s attacks of Eve/lyn thus punish and regulate zir gendered behaviour. Moreover, Mother’s role in fabricating Eve/lyn’s physical beauty reveals a possible intention to invite objectification by the male gaze. In this sense, Eve/lyn’s and Tristessa’s femininities can be understood in similar ways.

Eve/lyn and Tristessa share hyper-feminine, self-conscious gendered performances that play to the expectations of a critical male gaze. Their roles of negativity, nothingness and passivity reflect the ways in which hegemonic gender values enforce limited categories of being. In occupying spaces of negation, especially in opposition with the idea of men as positive and active, Tristessa’s and Eve/lyn’s performances of femininity demonstrate the ways in which such binaries can reinforce the hegemonic gendered order. The pitting of masculine and feminine as opposites is a patriarchal practice designed to divide and alienate people from one another to perpetuate the holding of power and wealth within a male, upper-class sphere. The defiance of this dichotomy through a celebration of diversity and queerness assists in destabilising these categories and opening a world of equality. In dismantling dominant gender ideologies, it becomes possible to reach new understandings of the self, discover new modes of expression and find new ways to live. Challenging the status quo thus reveals the possibility of new beginnings and offers an opportunity for societal rebirth.

## Chapter 10: Identity and Rebirth:

“You are going to bring forth the Messiah of the Antithesis!”

When Evelyn is turned into Eve, at the hand of Mother (the many-breasted, self-anointed fertility goddess of Beulah), Eve/lyn experiences ontological and psychological rebirth. Zie is a recipient of ‘psycho-surgery,’ which is a term of Mother’s coining designed to express the changes Eve/lyn will experience on both a physical and mental level. Eve/lyn, before zir surgery, asks zir carer, Sophia, “does a change in the colouration of the rind alter the taste of the fruit?” (65) and Sophia “assures” zem that “a change in the appearance will restructure the essence” (65). In this section, I first discuss the role of technology in Eve/lyn’s psycho-surgery before moving on to examine how *The Passion of New Eve* adopts a mythological lens for narrating Eve/lyn’s rebirth and zir place in the world.

### Technology and Rebirth

Susan Stryker, in her article (originally a performance piece) “My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix,” insists that

[t]he transsexual body is an unnatural body. It is the product of medical science. It is a technological construction. It is flesh torn apart and sewn together again in a shape other than that in which it was born. In these circumstances, I find a deep affinity between myself as a transsexual woman and the monster in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. (238)

Like Victor Frankenstein’s creation, Eve/lyn is a technological construction. In *Theorising the Fantastic*, Lucie Armitt argues that Eve/lyn is a half-synthetic, half-organic figure, a cyborg. She argues that, in its fusion of opposites, the cyborg is a contradictory image which exemplifies the postmodernist qualities in Carter’s novel, especially those of synthesis and rejecting closure. Eve/lyn, as a post-human figure who occupies an ambiguous state between

natural and artificial, organic and synthetic, can be thought of as an abject figure who, through zir embracing of spaces between and outside binaries, holds the potential to disrupt hegemonic order.

When Eve/lyn arrives in Beulah, zir fate is foreshadowed through zir bedroom, which poses as a visual symbol of the womb. The room has a “pinkish luminescence at the foot of the wall” (46) and is “quite round, as if it had been blown out like bubblegum, inflated under the earth” (46). Eve/lyn notes that “everything in the room had a curiously artificial quality, although nothing seemed unreal, far from it” (45-6). It is not until a woman’s voice transmits into his room, telling Eve/lyn “NOW YOU ARE AT THE PLACE OF BIRTH” (49; caps in original), that zie realises “the warm, red place in which I lay was a simulacrum of the womb” (49). Although wanting to draw attention to the room’s artificiality, Carter does not want her readers to perceive this space as fake.

Carter’s use of the word ‘simulacrum’ recalls Jean Baudrillard, who, in “The Precession of Simulacra,” insists that “simulation threatens the difference between ‘true’ and ‘false,’ between ‘real’ and ‘imaginary’” (Baudrillard 254). Essentially, the act of simulation makes the difference between the simulation and the simulated indistinguishable. If a cisgender woman is simulated and a transwoman is a simulation, then the act of simulation reveals that each is just as ‘false’ and just as ‘real’ as the other. In this way, the ‘real’ “no longer has to be rational, since it is no longer measured against some ideal or negative instance” (Baudrillard 254). Thus, when Carter refers to the bedroom as both ‘artificial’ and ‘not unreal,’ she is paving the way for her readers to think about Eve/lyn’s imminent womanhood in a similar way. Despite the artificial process by which Eve/lyn is given a womb and made into a woman, Eve/lyn is left with “a wound that would, in future, bleed once a month, at the bidding of the moon,” (67), just like any ‘natural’ woman might do. Thus, Eve/lyn is both real and unreal, natural and artificial. By simulating a woman, zie also

becomes the woman and thereby undermines the oppositionality of these binaries. Eve/lyn's ability to be both natural and artificial reflects a similar ability to occupy multiple genders simultaneously. Technology therefore plays an important role in Eve/lyn's rebirth in terms of how it contributes to understandings of the malleability and multicity of gender and identity.

Eve/lyn's surgery leaves zem "a complete woman" (65), anatomically speaking, with "tits, clit, ovaries, labia major, labia minor . . ." (65; ellipses in original). However, Eve/lyn must undergo psychological conditioning in order to be assimilated more fully into the woman that Mother expects zem to be. Just as Eve/lyn's physical change relies on the technology that surgery offers, Mother and the citizens of Beulah employ technological means to manipulate Eve/lyn's psyche. Through the aid of visual and aural stimuli, made accessible through the medium of technology, Eve/lyn is made to watch

reproductions of, I should think, every single virgin and child that had ever been painted in the entire history of western European art, projected upon my curving wall in real-life colours and blown up to larger-than-life size, accompanied by a soundtrack composed of the gurgling of babies and the murmuring of contented mothers. (Carter 69)

In addition to these images and sounds, Eve/lyn is presented with non-phallic and vaginal imagery: "sea-anemones opening and closing; caves with streams issuing from them; roses, opening to admit a bee, the sea, the moon" (69). Eve/lyn is exposed to stimuli that are meant to "instil the maternal instinct" in zem (69) and prepare zem for becoming the mother of zir own child. Eve/lyn is also presented with movies of Tristessa's in which she performs "every kitsch excess of the mode of femininity" (68). Eve/lyn is predominantly aware of what effect the psychological conditioning is meant to have on zem. Zie understands that the maternal and vaginal imagery is intended to psychologically connect zem with zir new body but zie is

uncertain whether “Mother wanted me to model my new womanhood upon [Tristessa’s] tenebrous delinquency and so relegate me always to the shadowed half being of reflected light” (68). Eve/lyn’s awareness of the possibilities of psycho-surgery opens a space for the reader to consider the different factors that can shape and influence gender.

After having been exposed to hours of ‘feminine’ stimuli, Eve/lyn, finds that zir “transformation was both perfect and imperfect” (74). Eve/lyn describes zerself as having “two channels of sensation: her own fleshly ones and his mental ones” (74). Zie separates body from mind, femininity from masculinity. Where psycho-surgery is meant to unite the mind with the body—to make zir gender and sex congruent—Eve/lyn finds zerself in a complex space where zie is neither completely male nor female but occupies positions in both genders. Eve/lyn enters the realm of the queer. Zie has the body of a woman but “the cock in my head, still, twitched at the sight of myself” (71). Carter’s use of this phrase tells the reader two things about Eve/lyn’s identity. First of all, zir sexual preferences have not changed; zie is still attracted to the kinds of feminine bodies zie was attracted to before zir psycho-surgery. Secondly, and most importantly, zir desire is located in zir absent phallus, in the body part that zie believed defined her masculinity when zie was a man. Even with the absence of zir penis, zie still experiences heterosexual male desire as if it were, indeed, present.

Despite the many hours of technological conditioning that attempt to convince Eve/lyn into psychological womanhood, they are not enough to stop zem thinking like the heterosexual man zie used to be. It is in this way that Carter positions Beulah, its citizens, and Mother, as the regulating forces of society. Judith Butler argues that “gender is made to comply with a model of truth and falsity which not only contradicts its own performative fluidity, but serves a social policy of gender regulation and control” (“Performative Acts” 528). The figures of regulation in Beulah represent the forces in the real world that insist on dictating gender roles. Since gender is “about what men and women are supposed to do in the

world” and can cover everything from what a person can wear to how they are expected to behave (Namaste 587-8), Eve/lyn is expected to follow a traditionally maternal, passive form of womanhood. However, it is neither Tristessa’s movies nor the images and sounds of babies, virgins and vaginas that push Eve/lyn into embracing congruent womanhood but the experience of zir first menstruation, which marks “the emblem of my function” (77). Mother tells zem that zie is allowed one test menstruation before Eve/lyn will be impregnated with zir own sperm. Having this role of motherhood forced upon zem is what marks zir first steps into identifying as a woman: “[t]hen I knew for certain that my change was absolute, and I must climb inside the skin of the girl . . . and learn, somehow, to live there” (77; my ellipses). The idea that Eve/lyn must “climb inside the skin of the girl” implies a strange balance between choice and lack thereof. Technically, Eve/lyn already wears the skin of a girl, in terms of zir appearance and bodily functions, but zie does not yet identify as belonging to this body, as being inside this body. It is almost as if zie looks upon zir body from the outside; zie witnesses zir physical changes but does not accept them as zir own. By climbing inside this skin, zie adopts the performative aspect of femininity, simultaneously deciding and having no choice but to embrace zir fate as a woman. In terms of counterarguments to the essentialising determinist view that biology is destiny, it is problematic that, although the psychological conditioning does little to locate Eve/lyn inside zir new skin, the presence of menstrual blood issuing from zir own body is enough to convince Eve/lyn that zie must be a woman.

Carter raises an important argument about the debate between the impacts of nature and nurture in terms of Eve/lyn’s process of feminine identification and the ideological conditioning zie is exposed to. The argument Carter makes develops on Simone de Beauvoir’s famous proclamation that one is not born a woman but becomes a woman (293). Here, Beauvoir challenges the hegemonic view that one’s roles are dictated by the nature of one’s sex, suggesting instead that it is not in one’s nature to be a woman; rather, it is through

a process of nurturing that one learns the expected roles one is expected to play as a woman. Carter takes this argument further, suggesting that it is a through a synthesis of the cultural and the natural that gender can take shape. Gender is thus a combined product of one's circumstances at birth and the ideological conditioning that one is exposed to. For Eve/lyn, the circumstance of being femininely sexed at the time of zir 'rebirth' works in tandem with the sociocultural forces influencing zir gendered femininity. It is through the necessity of 'passing' as female that Eve/lyn learns how to be female. Although zie resists the ideological conditioning zie is exposed to in Beulah, zie pays close attention to the performative qualities of Zero's other wives, adopting in zerself many of their feminine behaviours and utterances.

Donna Haraway's ideas about the significance of technology in formations of identity contribute to understandings of gender in *The Passion of New Eve*. In "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s," Haraway argues that a cyborg is "a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" (324). In establishing the notion that all humans are cyborgs (325), Haraway challenges what "counts as women's experience in the late twentieth century" (324). She argues that

[t]here is nothing about being 'female' that naturally binds women. There is not even such a state as 'being' female, itself a highly complex category constructed in contested sexual scientific discourses and other social practices. (329)

It is impossible to claim a purely natural state of femininity because gender is a cyborgian phenomenon, at once a lived reality and a social fiction. When Haraway makes the statement that "[i]t is not clear who makes and who is made in the relation between human and machine" (346), she reveals the way in which gender is simultaneously constructed by and constructing reality and fiction.

In establishing Eve/lyn's shift to femininity in terms of being both natural and artificial, both fiction and reality, Carter's critiques on the construction of gender align with Haraway's theory of the cyborg. Eve/lyn's femininity is a fiction insofar as it is shaped by the expected conventions of social order, much in the same way genre shapes textual fiction. Eve/lyn's femininity is also a fact, a lived reality, since the way zie presents zemself according to social codes dictates the ways in which zie might be treated, which in turn shapes zir lived experience. In revealing Eve/lyn's cyborgian femininity, the text also exposes the same realities and fictions at work in the construction of Eve/lyn's masculine gender as well as in all genders.

Unlike in many examples of popular genre trans\* fictions, where the central character changes their body to suit their identity, Eve/lyn changes zir identity to suit zir new body. Through a conscious effort, zie internalises the social practices, physical mannerisms, verbal intonations and facial expressions that zie believes will make zem more of a woman and/or enable zem to 'pass' as a woman. The way Eve/lyn defines zir gender according to zir body implies that the biological body is the primary influence on gender identity. Queer discourse makes the firm assertion that the physical body does not necessarily define a person's gender. As Judith Butler famously insists, the presence or absence of a "[p]hallus does not constitute the entirety of [a person's] worth" (*Undoing Gender* 72). Although Eve/lyn comes to define zir gender according to zir absent phallus, the fact that zie does this out of necessity allows the reader to consider the alternatives that Eve/lyn does not. Eve/lyn, as a product of science, demonstrates that identity is not always consistent or congruent; it is both a construction and something that is fluid. The vast changes Eve/lyn is forced to experience highlight how identity and perceptions of the self can operate as an ongoing process. Later in the novel, when Eve/lyn tells Leilah that zie could not possibly go back to being a man, the reader is left thinking about the way Eve/lyn also could not imagine being a woman when zie was a man

but that zie assimilated into the role nonetheless. Although Eve/lyn's 'psychosurgery' has little influence on zir identification as a woman, zir process of rebirth and identity formation is influenced significantly by mythology.

### **Mythology and Rebirth**

When Eve/lyn first arrives at the entrance to Beulah, zie is invited to admire the broken "stone cock with testicles" (44). Zie notes that "[b]eneath this stone sits the mother in a complicated mix of mythology and technology, which I for one will never be able to unravel though I am its inheritor" (44). Just as Eve/lyn can never truly unravel the complicated relationship between mythology and technology that occurs in Beulah, the reader must also grapple with Eve/lyn's complex relationship with mythology, gender and rebirth. *The Passion of New Eve*, unlike every other text I examine in Parts One and Two, employs mythology as a means of narrating Eve/lyn's gender and rebirth. Mythology, which itself straddles terrain between 'fact' and 'fiction,' assists in emphasising how Eve/lyn is not just one fixed entity but multiple and mutable. Myth assists in dismantling readerly preoccupations with 'reality' and 'truth,' raising questions regarding the nature of gender that deconstruct the binary of male and female.

In "Notes from the Front Line," Carter argues that "all myths are products of the human mind and reflect only aspects of material human practice" (71). Bristow and Broughton assert that "by wresting myths and legends from their originators, Carter creates a powerful dialectic. Throughout her writing, she maintains that the possibility of creating new desires cannot be dissociated from the cultural forces that have moulded them over time" (14). In *The Passion of New Eve*, Carter uses these ideas surrounding myth and desire to reflect a similar practice in the construction of gender. Carter famously called *The Passion of New Eve* an "anti-mythic novel," meaning that her work sets out to deconstruct and unsettle

that which is often accepted as social or cultural ‘fact.’ Consequently, “in demystifying archetypes of femininity, [*The Passion of New Eve*] invokes myths in a number of contradictory ways – ones that are pulled towards yet push against both femininity and patriarchy” (Makinen 162). Due to Carter’s claim that she is a “feminist in everything,” there is a tendency to assume that she must uphold and represent the ideals of feminism. Such ideals include a seriousness and austerity for representing the plights and struggles of women. Carter, however, is more interested in the taboo and that which others tread lightly around – she storms into the war zones that her feminist contemporaries avoid and exposes the blood, gore, gunfire and rubble of society. Myth is one of the many tools she uses to access these war zones.

*The Passion of New Eve* frequently refers to mythological figures, stories and the idea of mythology itself. Carter refers to Greek, Hellenistic, Christian, Jewish, Islamic, Norse, Arabic, German and other forms of myth and legend. She draws upon a wide variety of intertexts and builds on the ideas within these to create her own mythologies. This section first focuses on Carter’s feminist use of Christian theology and then discusses how Carter employs Greek mythology in *The Passion of New Eve* to narrate rebirth and Eve/lyn’s consequential ‘return’ to the womb.

In *The Passion of New Eve*, Eve/lyn is told that “you will be a new Eve, not Evelyn! . . . And the Virgin Mary, too. Be glad!” (67). Eve/lyn has two very significant mythological roles of rebirth imposed upon her: she is expected to be the first woman and to give birth to the Messiah. The literary critic Stephen Greenblatt writes that “[o]ver the centuries there have been innumerable interpretations of the story of Adam and Eve” (303). In the Genesis Creation narrative, Eve is the first woman and is born of Adam’s rib. Her creation is for Adam’s sake, as “she was meant to be a helpmeet” (Greenblatt 130). The Creation narrative has witnessed many “absurdities in interpretation” (Greenblatt 234). Some

readings of the Creation narrative argue, for example, that Eve was so beautiful that Satan fell in love with her, or that Eve slept with the serpent and gave birth to a demon, or that she instigated an order of young virgin women, or that Eve beat her husband with a stick from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil until he ate the forbidden fruit, or that she herself was the forbidden fruit (Greenblatt 254). In *The Passion of New Eve*, Carter grapples with and challenges a long history of misogyny and patriarchal order that finds its roots in various interpretations of the ‘fall’ of Adam and Eve.

Some readings of Eve’s plucking of the fruit, as Greenblatt points out, argue that “there is no denying that Eve had sinned” (125) and that “[o]ne of her punishments, imposed directly by God, was that woman would be dominated by man: ‘and he shall rule over thee’” (Greenblatt 125). Greenblatt argues that, because of views such as this one, “whatever authority woman wielded was strictly constrained by limits that were traced back to the sin of the first woman” (125). Some interpretations of God’s punishment have led to views such as the one found in the Book of Timothy in the New Revised Standard Edition of the Bible: “[l]et a woman learn in silence with all submissiveness. I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor” (*Holy Bible*, 1 Tim. 2.11-14). Throughout the last two millennia, most of the world’s cultures have followed hegemonic and patriarchal structures that dictate woman’s inferiority and oppositionality to man. The story of Adam and Eve, although not to blame for creating sexism, has, as Mary Wollstonecraft argues, served “as a device to justify the subjugation of women” (Greenblatt 137). However, despite some perspectives that Eve holds fault for all of humankind’s issues, she is not always viewed in a position of condemnation.

Some interpretations of the Creation story present Eve as the hero. Greenblatt argues that “[u]nderstood properly, the Bible makes clear that the first woman was not merely the

equal to the first man but rather his superior. Adam was formed of mere clay, Eve of the Noble substance of the human body; he was born outside of Eden, she in Paradise itself' (134). The capitalisation of the 'n' in "Noble" suggests that human flesh is the most superior form that any living entity can take or be derived from. It might be excessive to call Eve superior to Adam; however, celebrating Eve and the progress she represents in terms of human advancement seems more worthwhile than condemning her and using her as an excuse to "justify and reinforce the virtual enslavement of all women" (Greenblatt 135). However, not all interpretations of Eve utilise the Creation story to reinforce patriarchal ideology.

John Milton is famous for his positive representation of Eve in *Paradise Lost* (1667) and his views on gender equality, freedom, innocence and consent. In Milton's work Eve is Adam's equal in her own right. As Greenblatt puts it, "[s]he might be persuaded, but she cannot and will not be compelled" (223). Greenblatt's phrasing hints at the coy cheekiness of Milton's Eve but also reminds the reader that her actions are her own and she can make decisions for herself. In *Paradise Lost*, Eve yields to Adam with "coy submission, modest pride, / And sweet reluctant amorous delay" (Milton 4.310-311). Milton's use of oxymoron allows the reader to think about the way Adam and Eve come together as both opposites and equals. William Blake, a great admirer of Milton's work, adopts this idea of oppositionality in his work through the idea of Beulah as a place where contrarities exist together (Blake, "Milton: Book the Second" 30[33].1). Angela Carter alludes to Blake, Milton and a vast history of theology and feminism relating to Eve to raise questions about rebirth and gender.

Carter challenges hegemonic structures of gender in *The Passion of New Eve* through the readers' understandings of Christian theology and feminist history. She uses the character of Mother to represent some of the more extreme views about Eve's exalted position. When Mother explains to Eve/lyn how zie will be impregnated by zir own sperm, Mother tells zem

that “[y]ou’re going to bring forth the Messiah of the Antithesis!” (64). Here, Mother is referring to and overturning a history in which women are second and opposite to men. She tells Eve/lyn that “[w]oman has been the antithesis in the dialectic of creation quite long enough” (64) and claims that she is “about to make a start on the feminisation of Father Time” (64). Mother’s bold attempt to invert patriarchy into matriarchy and her reliance on the oppositionality between man and woman threatens to disrupt the queer balance of the novel. Mother’s goals rely on the binaries of male and female and do not consider the possible spaces between and outside of these two gender identities. As the novel progresses, it is Eve/lyn (and therefore the reader, also) who is able to develop *zir* thinking about the queerness of gender. Yet, Eve/lyn’s development of thought is only possible because of *zir* escape from Beulah. When *zie* escapes, Eve/lyn assumes Mother will abduct some other unfortunate man from the desert; however, Mother’s plans are unable to manifest – she fails to feminise father time within the space of the novel and supposedly ends up in a cave, waiting out the war in solitude.

Perhaps one of the reasons Mother fails to invert patriarchy is because she falls into a trap of contradiction. She tells Eve/lyn that “first of all beings in the world, you can seed yourself and fruit yourself. With the aid of my sperm-bank, you’re entirely self-sufficient, Eva!” (73). Mother strives for the kind of female independence that would make men obsolete; however, independence from men paradoxically depends on male biology, since reproduction, with some exceptions such as cloning, typically requires the merging of XY chromosomes and XX chromosomes. Eve/lyn may be self-sufficient but only because *zie* used to be an anatomical male. *Zie* cannot therefore be independent of men. Mother’s claim for Eve/lyn’s independence is further contradicted by Sophia telling Eve/lyn that “the authentic Messiah would be born of a man” (66). Mother and her society of women in Beulah therefore both shun and value men. More important, however, is the question of who the

Messiah is. Will the ‘saviour of the opposite’ be Eve/lyn’s self-fruited, self-seeded baby, or is the saviour Eve/lyn zerself? Eve/lyn, given that zie used to be a man, is therefore also ‘born’ of a man, just like Eve in the Creation narrative is born of Adam’s rib. The novel refuses to answer these questions. Eve/lyn escapes Beulah before zie is forced into motherhood. Instead, zie becomes victim to a series of new abuses that would suggest zie is not, in fact, the Messiah of a new world order in which women come first and men are subordinate to them. Perhaps the Messiah is, in fact, the new life that Eve/lyn carries inside zem much later in the novel, after zie makes love with Tristessa in the desert. If this is the case, then the Messiah represents a new world order in which queerness prevails. As Lilith comments to Eve/lyn, “[y]our baby will have two fathers and two mothers” (183). Both Tristessa and Eve/lyn occupy complex spaces in the realm of the queer. Eve/lyn is a woman who experiences transformation and fluidity and Tristessa is a woman with a penis who defies congruent binaries of feminine and masculine. Indeed, Mother refuses to perform surgery on Tristessa because “he was too much of a woman” (169). The combination of the masculine pronoun ‘he’ and the word ‘woman’ destabilises mutually exclusive gender binaries and lends Tristessa a hybrid complexity that stands apart from most of the contemporary trans\* characters analysed in Part One and shares similarities with the hybrid spaces embraced by Jake and Anna in Part Two.

Carter further explores and breaks down ideas of oppositionality through her choice of name for the underground community Beulah. In *The Passion of New Eve*, mythology is so bound up with the narrative that even the settings have mythologies of their own. Beulah is the womb-like city burrowed out beneath the dry, sterile desert. The narrator draws the reader’s attention to Beulah’s mythological status through the statement that, in Beulah, “myth is a made thing, not a found thing” (53). According to the Bible, ‘Beulah’ was the name given to Palestine when it was restored to God’s favour (Damon 42): “[t]hou shalt no

more be termed Forsaken; neither shall thy land any more be termed Desolate: but thou shalt be called Hephzibah, and thy land Beulah: for the LORD delighteth in thee, and thy land shall be married” (*King James Bible*, Isa. 62.4). In this passage, “[t]hy land shall be married” means to be favoured or blessed. In *The Passion of New Eve*, Beulah occupies an iconographic status of fertility in contrast to the sterile desert that surrounds it. Throughout his prophetic works, William Blake develops his ideas about the kind of place Beulah is. In Blake’s mythology, the word Beulah comes from the Hebrew, meaning ‘married’ or ‘espoused.’ Blake first mentions Beulah in *The Four Zoas*: “Night the First,” where he describes it as “a Soft Moony Universe feminine lovely/Pure mild & Gentle given in Mercy to those who sleep/Eternally” (Blake 5.30-32; Erdman 303). Here, Beulah is a dreamy paradise, a place for “mild & pleasant rest” (Blake 5.29; Erdman 303). Blake develops his thinking about Beulah in two significant ways that are applicable to *The Passion of New Eve*. He first considers Beulah as a place of opposites and then later shapes it as a place of sexual liberation.

In his poem *Milton: Book the Second*, Blake describes Beulah as “a place where Contrarities are equally True” (Blake 30[33].1-2; Erdman 129). Carter borrows this idea from Blake, quoting the opening line of the second book word-for-word: “[t]here is a place where contrarities are equally true. This place is called Beulah” (Carter 44). Carter alludes to Blake again through a paraphrase of the same quote: “here I am in Beulah, the place where contrarities exist together” (Carter 45). Carter’s decision is deliberate – she wants her readers to recognise the literary allusion. Blake incorporates oxymoron in a similar way to Milton. In Blake’s work, according to S. Foster Damon, “it is now well known that in the Subconscious, love and hate coexist without affecting each other, also tenderness and cruelty, prudishness and lust, cleanliness and filth, and other such split impulses” (42). In the sense that Beulah is a place of contrarities, it is therefore possible to assume that all the

contradictions there are purposeful. When Eve/lyn perceives Mother as the “many-breasted Artemis, another sterile goddess of fertility” (Carter, *Passion* 74), the reader can enjoy the irony of the setting she chooses for herself: the womb-like space of fertility burrowed out beneath the sterile desert.

In Blake’s Poem *Jerusalem: The Emanation of the Giant Albion*, Beulah is a land of “sexual pleasures” (Damon 43), a place where “the unions of the sexes are ideal and unrestricted” (Damon 43) despite the idea that “the sexes are separate” (Damon 42-3). Carter creates further contradiction within her own idea of Beulah. Carter’s Beulah is a society made up entirely of women. No man enters Beulah, except to be made into a woman. This Beulah is a place for women to escape the wrath of men, to live peaceably among themselves and to plot overturning patriarchal order. It is therefore unlikely that Carter’s Beulah can fulfil Blake’s ideal of sexual liberation between the sexes. As Blake continues into the third chapter of *Jerusalem*, he describes Beulah as a place “Where every Female delights to give her maiden to her husband/The Female searches sea & land for gratification to the/ Male Genius: who in return clothes her in gems & gold” (Blake 69.15-18; Erdman 223). In Carter’s Beulah, by contrast, the women seem to be abstinent. Eve/lyn describes Sophia as having a “virgin’s look of disdain” (73). It is therefore paradoxical that Mother promotes heterosexual desire in such an Amazonian setting. Beulah, just like Mother, is a place of contradiction and paradox, a place that defies singular definition, just like queer gender. The fact that Eve/lyn is reborn in the place where contrarities exist together makes zem a living, breathing oxymoron of gender and mythology. Just as Christian mythologies play an important role in contextualising Eve/lyn’s rebirth, Greek mythology, too, influences identity and gender in the novel’s characters.

Leilah and Tristessa both experience different forms of rebirth through their interactions with mirrors. The literal and symbolic use of mirrors by women throughout the

novel evokes the Greek myth of Narcissus who, through falling in love with his own reflection, was driven to commit suicide upon the knowledge that his love could never manifest. Julia Kristeva links narcissism with abjection, arguing that “[a]bjection, with a meaning broadened to take in subjective diachrony, is a precondition of narcissism . . . The more or less beautiful imagine in which I behold or recognize myself rests upon an abjection that sunders it as soon as repression, the constant watchman, is relaxed” (13). Heather Johnson identifies that “[t]he recurrence of reflective surfaces in the novel points to desire as primarily narcissistic . . . it describes a trajectory of desire which begins and ends in the self” (177). Indeed, Leilah, Tristessa and Eve/lyn all experience moments of self-centred desire in relation to the mirror. In his collection of essays *Ways of Seeing*, the art critic John Berger expresses a notion that the female subject is always self-surveying, arguing that woman, having “been taught and persuaded to survey herself” (46), must inevitably “watch [herself] being looked at” (47) and that, in doing so, “her own sense of being in herself is supplanted by a sense of being appreciated as herself by another” (46). Mirrors, in Carter’s novel, therefore, operate as a commentary on feminine desire and the construction of gender. As Marina Warner observes, “[m]any of Angela Carter’s characters have another self in wonderland, through the mirror, a not-self which defines them and gives them vitality, but also serves to mark the absence of the true self and, with that absence, the impossibility of that existence” (252). Additionally, David Punter insists that the recurring trope of mirroring estranges gender from the body as well as the image from the self and thus codifies women as the passive objects of masculine desire (36). It is therefore important to examine the power balance in Eve/lyn’s relationship with Leilah in terms of Laura Mulvey’s theories about the ‘male gaze.’

Eve/lyn notes that Leilah “seemed to abandon her self in the mirror, to abandon her self to the mirror, and allowed herself to function only as a fiction in the erotic dream into

which the mirror cast me” (26). John Berger advances the same idea—that a woman cannot be herself when she is seen—writing that there “remains the implication that the subject (a woman) is aware of being seen by a spectator” (*Ways of Seeing* 49-50). Although Berger writes of the female subjects in art forms such as paintings and sculptures, his arguments are applicable to performances of femininity in both fiction and day-to-day life. It is through the mirror that Leilah creates a version of herself that determines her fate as a sexual object. According to Berger, women “do to themselves what men do to them. They survey, like men, their own femininity” (64). This self-surveillance occurs because of how aware women are of being surveyed by others. Aware of the spectator’s expectations and preferences, she can choose to present herself in a way that caters to these expectations and preferences or she can choose not to.

Leilah’s preoccupation with self-surveillance is apparent in the way “[s]he became absorbed in the contemplation of the figure in the mirror” (Carter 24). Leilah is just as absorbed in her own reflection as Eve/lyn is: “together, we entered the same reverie, the self-created, self-perpetuating, solipsistic world of the woman watching herself being watched in a mirror” (26). Although Eve/lyn notices that it is “another Leilah” (24) who is conjured in the mirror, the very creation of this other self for the purpose of performance and feeding an audience’s sexual appetite leads the reader to question what kind of performances Leilah enacts outside of the mirror’s hold, which consequently enables the reader to question all performances of femininity. The way Leilah “became her own reflection” (24) demonstrates her capacity for performance. Indeed, Eve/lyn finds out much later in the novel that Leilah’s real name is Lilith. In Jewish folklore, Lilith, in addition to being Adam’s first wife, is a demon who threatens evil upon children and women in childbirth. The name ‘Lilith’ is often translated as ‘night monster’ (Encyclopaedia Britannica). Leilah is, indeed, a creature of the night, and performs a siren-like monstrosity when she “used to rouge [her] nipples and dance

a dance called the End of the World, to lead the unwary into temptation” (Carter 169). Just as Leilah leads unsuspecting men into temptation, the mirror, too, entices and tempts those who lay their gaze upon its reflective glass and experience “the lure of that narcissic loss of being, when the face leaks into the looking-glass like water into sand” (100).

The mythical and symbolic use of mirrors in Carter’s novel also extends to Tristessa’s own performance of self. It is through the mirror that Tristessa simultaneously becomes and creates who she is. Tristessa uses the third person to talk about her identity:

Tristessa is a lost soul who lodges in me; she’s lived in me so long I can’t remember a time she was not there, she came and took possession of my mirror one day when I was looking at myself. She invaded the mirror like an army with banners; she entered through my eyes. (147-8)

Here, Tristessa evokes the kinds of dual identities I discuss in Part One in novels such as *The Danish Girl* and *The Secret Life of Luke Livingstone*. Where those twenty-first century popular genre fictions silence the possibility of multiple identities by establishing the self as caught between two incompatible modes of being (the masculine and the feminine), Carter’s novel emphasises that duality can not only be embraced but that unlimited options beyond duality exist in the form of multiplicity. It is through Tristessa’s interactions with the mirror that she becomes a woman. The idea that she gets ‘possessed’ presents several possibilities for interpretation. If femininity can be understood as something that is constantly scrutinised, can it indeed be found in a mirror? In gazing in the mirror, can one discover other versions of the self? Perhaps Tristessa has always identified as a woman and her moment of mirror-gazing is the portal that reveals this part of herself to her and encourages her to embrace the role she must play (according to Berger) of female self-surveillance. Yet, Tristessa’s referral to herself in the third person and the way she says “she entered through my eyes” (148)

suggests that she has not always identified as a woman, that she has experienced flux in her gender. Perhaps, when she was a man, she saw a woman reflected and thought she must assume the role of womanhood, believing that the self-surveying she engaged in was not akin to masculinity (notice how Berger only refers to the female subject as one who self-surveys and how Mulvey only considers the possibilities of a heterosexual male gaze). Carter offers multiple and complex possibilities to narrate Tristessa's gender. Even when Tristessa has been captured by Zero and forced to copulate with Eve/lyn, she still relies on the mirror. Only through the mirror is Tristessa able, "by miraculous degrees, to grow back into his reflected self. . . . He leaned forward and scrutinised the romantic apparition in the mirror with eyes filled with an obscure distress and also a luminous pride" (130). In this traumatic situation, Tristessa draws on the power of the mirror to restore her femininity.

Of most significant note out of the many Greek figures Carter calls upon in her writing is Oedipus. The most well-known version of Oedipus's story is that Laius (Oedipus's father and the King of Thebes) received a prophecy informing him that his son would kill him. After Oedipus was adopted, he learned of the prophecy. Thinking that his adoptive parents were his biological parents, he vowed never to return to Corinth, where they lived, to prevent the prophecy from happening. However, in the very attempt to prevent his fate, he made it happen. Not knowing who his birth parents were, Oedipus inevitably killed his father (Laius) and married his mother (Jocasta). In *The Passion of New Eve*, the women of Beulah hold Oedipus in an exalted position, calling him "the most fortunate man in the world, for he embraced his fate with pleasure" (53). The women's view that Oedipus embraced his fate demonstrates the malleable nature of myth, that it can be shaped to fit any story or theory.

Most versions of Oedipus's fate dictate that he sought to avoid it. The women of Beulah, however, see Oedipus's fate as something to strive for – they reshape the myths of Oedipus to narrate the trajectory of Eve/lyn's 'return' to the womb. During the ritual of

Eve/lyn's rape by Mother, the women chant and call out encouragement. Sophia urges Eve/lyn to "kill your father, sleep with your mother – burst through all the interdictions" (60). It is only through the Freudian killing of the father that Eve/lyn can be reintegrated with the mother. The mother and father that the women and leader of Beulah refer to, however, all exist within Eve/lyn. Through Eve/lyn's change of sex, Mother 'kills' the father whose genitalia are cut away with a scalpel, whose insides are excavated to make space for a womb, and whose semen has already been collected and stored. Finally, the planting of Eve/lyn's own seed in her new womb is meant to symbolise her return to the womb. Yet, the figurehead of Beulah, Mother, is also a womb that Eve/lyn returns to. Mother urges Eve/lyn to "come back where you belong" (60). Although initially wishing to escape Mother, Eve/lyn attempts to return to her one final time.

Towards the end of *The Passion of New Eve*, Eve/lyn attempts to visit Mother in a coastal cave hide-out. Here, the novel seems as if it might conclude cyclically, through Eve/lyn's symbolic return to the womb – a kind of synthesis with the mother/maker. Sarah Gamble writes that "Eve's voyage into the cave at the end of the novel represents the ultimate attempt to return 'home,' since it is also a figurative voyage into the body of the Mother who made her" (103). In reference to the work of the technothorist Donna Haraway, Lucie Armitt argues that the journey to the mother is not a journey towards a 'natural' point of origin but leads to the "technological womb" that brought 'Eve' into being (Armitt 176). Again, Julia Kristeva's theories on abjection align with *The Passion of New Eve*. Kristeva argues that everyone experiences abjection when they first attempt to break away from the mother. She defines the mother-child relationship as a conflict between the child struggling to break free and the mother being reluctant to let go. To ensure separation and subjectivity the infant must initiate steps to expel or reject the mother – the subject must endeavour to rid itself of those objects which blur the boundaries between self and (m)other (Hunt 146).

In the case of *The Passion of New Eve*, Eve/lyn attempts to visit Mother one last time—perhaps to disavow her completely—but zie does not find her. The fact that Eve/lyn is denied the possibility of return highlights Kristeva’s idea that abjection means never being able to expel what the subject seeks to rid itself of or absorb that which it tries to hold close.

There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated. (Kristeva 1)

Whether Eve/lyn likes it or not, zie can never rid zerself of zir origins with Mother but can also never return to the mother – zir subjectivity will always be ambiguous, just like zir gender and identity.

The cave that Eve/lyn traverses, despite being uninhabited by Mother, bears a remarkable resemblance to the womb and the vagina. Carter describes Mother’s cave using vaginal imagery. Eve/lyn enters through a fissure, out of which “gushed a little fountain of fresh water” (175). This gushing recalls the fluids that the vagina produces from arousal, sexual climax and pregnancy. Eve/lyn’s realisation that zie “must slide into the living rock all alone to rendezvous with my maker” (175) emphasises the tightness of the space zie is trying to enter. Eve/lyn passes through a series of caves, wades through a stream that grows with “a soft and generous warmth” (176) and navigates past “walls of slimy velvet” (180). Eve/lyn both succeeds and fails to return to the mother. Although Mother is not there, the cave itself symbolises the womb-like space from which most life originates and is filled with testaments to Eve/lyn’s past. In this sense, Carter creates an open ending for her novel, thus defying traditional plot conventions as well as denying any certainty for her readers.

Instead of a return to Mother, Eve/lyn sets sail on the ocean in a small boat. Scholars writing on *The Passion of New Eve* have argued about what the conclusion of the novel means. Makinen interprets the ending as a positive one, claiming that Eve/lyn “can set out into a future where her child – the fruit of a transsexual and a transvestite – will grow up with entirely new concepts of masculinity and femininity, since the old ones have proved redundant” (163). Roz Kaveney, by contrast, sees the conclusion of the novel in a grim light:

*The Passion of New Eve* is a novel which might have been expected to end in a utopian vision of sexual equality or transcendence that would parallel, or redeem, the various sexual hells it has shown us earlier. Carter refuses standard literary and generic closures; she is not one for telling us what to do or what to believe. (183)

There is no right or wrong way to interpret how *The Passion of New Eve* ends. The novel closes on this line: “[o]cean, ocean, mother of mysteries, bear me to the place of birth” (187), implying that Eve/lyn has not given up on her return to the womb and highlighting the impending arrival of her baby. In fact, the very water that carries Eve/lyn away from the shoreline of California is symbolic of the bodily fluids of both male sex organs and female sex organs. The Pacific Ocean could be the same gushing fluid that issues forth from the caves onshore, or it could be a sea of semen, carrying her to a distant, awaiting egg for insemination. Carter leaves these possibilities open for the reader to interpret, just as she leaves the subject of gender open for discussion. Eve/lyn is a person who defies simplistic understandings of gender and subjectivity – she is queer, she is fluid, she is multiple, she is complex.

Close analysis of the themes, literary conventions and narrative style at work *The Passion of New Eve* reveals important insights about the construction, performance,

multiplicity and mutability of gender and identity. Primarily a feminist text, Carter's reflections on the sociocultural construction of femininity demonstrate that problematic stereotypes aligned with femininity—such as passivity and negativity—are illusions reinforced to perpetuate patriarchal order. *Eve/lyn*'s character, as it develops, highlights the limitless potential of identification when one projects oneself beyond the constraints of a mutually exclusive binary. Carter's positioning of opposites in the text divulges the options available between and outside those boundaries, proving that singular modes of identification are not only unnecessary but also limiting. Projecting oneself beyond the stifling categories of masculine man and feminine woman opens unlimited possibilities for the identification and performance of self. *Eve/lyn* demonstrates that it is possible to encompass multiple spaces that might appear to be at odds with one another: human and post-human, natural and artificial, organic and synthetic, false and true, simulation and simulated, man and woman. With more diversity visible in society and popular culture, it becomes more possible for people to share their differences and show their queer. Who wants to see the world in black and white when it is possible to view it in a spectrum of colour?

## Chapter 11: *Orlando: A Biography*

Virginia Woolf's 1928 novel *Orlando: A Biography* is perhaps the most unique, playful and subversive text in the Western canon to enact queer gender. *Orlando* is a novel that considers notions of multiplicity and fluidity across gender, sex, desire, identity, time, age and experience. Modernist in form, style and content, but also drawing on cultural, social, historic, artistic and literary values over the course of approximately four hundred years, it is a complex text that challenges narrative convention, defies genre, destabilises binaries and transgresses boundaries. It explores the sociocultural phenomenon of gender not only in relation to an internal self which is shaped by desire, thought and the body but also in correlation with the external factors that influence gender roles, expression, performance and identification. Consequently, *Orlando* occupies a very distinct position in relation to the contemporary texts examined in this thesis.

Where the twenty-first century trans\* fictions considered in Part One invest themselves in representing the transgender or gender-nonconforming subject as being trapped in the wrong body, subscribing to traditional gender roles in order to 'pass,' navigating a double identity and 'killing' off an old self to reach a new 'true' self, the transgender in Woolf's *Orlando* defies all of these tropes for narrating queer identity. When the eponymous central character—whose life is depicted over the course of approximately four hundred years—wakes one morning to find he has become a woman, she expresses no discomfort with the change of sex. The way Orlando's transition is figured is significantly different from the texts analysed previously. Instead of long lead-up process and surgery, Orlando simply wakes up to discover their body has suddenly changed. Although their change is not chosen, it is accepted rather than agonised over. Indeed, neither 'male' body nor 'female' body imparts any sense of being 'wrong' – they simply *are*. Similarly, Orlando subverts traditional gender roles, remains connected with her male self and embraces an identity that moves

beyond the realm of singularity or duality and into a space of multiplicity. Pamela Caughie, in her article “The Temporality of Modernist Life Writing in the Era of Transsexualism,” argues that, “[i]n its very narrative form *Orlando* disrupts the sexual dimorphism theorists of transsexualism and transsexual narratives like Lili Elbe’s so often fall back on” (Caughie 515). *Orlando* is not trapped between a male self and a female self but occupies both genders as well as a space between and outside this binary.

Much of the analysis in this chapter focuses on *Orlando*’s moment of transition onwards due to the rich and complex potential that arises from crossing boundaries of gender and sexuality. Although brief, the moment of transition enables *Orlando* to look at the world with more nuance. This is not to say that *Orlando* pre-transition is without fluidity and multiplicity; the transition opens a portal to an even richer, more multiple self, thus enabling the text to resist binaries and singularity and offer a commentary on the role of gender performance and social expectations. As such, *Orlando*’s shifting and all-encompassing gender raises a question of pronoun suitability. Since *Orlando* is referred to with she/her pronouns following her transition, this chapter will predominantly use the same pronouns when referring to *Orlando* in this context. However, some instances require a shift to he/him pronouns (when discussing *Orlando* pre-transition) and others invite the use of they/them pronouns for the purpose of emphasising *Orlando*’s all-encompassing gender.

Significantly, where the trans\* subject is often established in contemporary fiction as neither experiencing desire nor being desirable, *Orlando*’s entire world is shaped by desire – she has sexual relations with whom she chooses, she is admired and lusted over by many— “her legs were among her chiefest beauties” (Woolf 475)—she goes where she pleases, does what she pleases and consistently fulfils her desire to write. She actively pursues her desire for ‘life’ and ‘a lover,’ indulges her desire to enjoy solitude and contemplate death, and even

meets her eventual desire to marry. In a sense, Orlando, as a character, is freed from many expectations of literary convention and is instead driven by desire:

[w]hat people do with their bodies in respect to fulfilling (or not) their desires depends on socially constituted realities differing by geographical locale, historical moment, economic resources, social standing and biological constraints, including the psychic constraints that the individual develops as a result of being interpellated as a gendered subject. Woolf carefully removes all but the latter of these constraints for Orlando, so that Orlando's story demonstrates that gender is socially constructed, even performative, and that desire is naturally and commonly polymorphous or bisexual when released from social strictness. (Helt 124)

Having removed most constraints that reduce opportunities for fulfilling desires, Woolf frees Orlando to contemplate and pursue their desires. Yet it is not just Orlando whose world is defined by desire; indeed, the text itself is shaped significantly by desire – an idea aptly reflected by “the fervent desire of the poem itself” (536) to be published and read.

Where many contemporary popular representations of queer gender repress desire and operate based on the literary convention of secrecy—of concealing and revealing information from and to the reader—Woolf's text reveals a very distinct relationship with desire. Soon after Orlando's transformation, the 'biographer' rejects philosophical debate and demonstrates a preference for desire and art by stating, “let other pens treat of sex and sexuality; we quit such odious subjects as soon as we can” (466-7). As Barbara Helt identifies,

[i]n Woolf's work, conscious indulgence of the ability of one's mind to range freely and contemplate openly *all* desires, even those that are socially proscribed, is necessary for full intellectual and artistic freedom. Thinking through desire, not sex or sexuality, is central to Woolf's concept of the artistic. (Helt 126)

In this sense, Orlando's desires, which "are consistently free-flowing and completely irrespective of sex and gender" (Helt 122) can also be understood as fluid and polymorphous, thus challenging social and scientific models of biological essentialism and gender stereotypes. Moreover, in placing the narrative in a similar position to Orlando—one liberated from the constraints of literary tradition—Woolf imparts a lifeforce of its own upon the narrative, enabling it to freely express and explore its own desires.

Where the contemporary trans\* narratives examined in Part One of this thesis demonstrate a problematic preoccupation with presenting their protagonists in a pathological light—as victimised, mentally unwell, isolated and out of place—Orlando is never a victim (except perhaps, although comically so, to the affections of the Archduchess/Archduke Harriet/Harry). She is never depicted as depressed, anxious or suicidal. Unlike Jake's feelings of not belonging and, despite preferring solitude and not being immediately recognised by the law following her transition, Orlando is never represented as being negatively isolated or out of place. Every space they inhabit is one in which they belong and do not experience ostracisation. Moreover, where many trans\* characters in contemporary popular fiction are projected into a childlike space where they are neither taken seriously nor deemed able to make decisions about their own lives, *Orlando* complicates this trope. Orlando, the narrator notes twice, is like a child insofar as she is completely new to womanhood and must learn the social role she is expected to play, which other women—the ones assigned female at birth—have ingrained in them from a very young age: "[i]t must be remembered that she was like a child entering into possession of a pleasaunce or toy cupboard; her arguments would not commend themselves to mature women, who have had the run of it all their lives" (Woolf 474). Positioning Orlando as a child is an important tool in the narrative, which permits space for Orlando's 'growing up,' an idea that reflects the wider message at work in Woolf's novel about the continuity of change and transformation. However, where infantilisation provides a

convenient plot device for the texts analysed in Part One, Orlando's 'growing up' is presented as a complex, ongoing process. Where characters like Jake from the analyses in Part Two experience their gender journey as one with a trajectory towards completion and finality, Orlando demonstrates that growth is unceasing and limitless. Through her change of sex, Orlando's learning process about how to be a woman allows Woolf to navigate the complex terrain of what it means to be and become a gendered individual in society. In this way, Orlando's 'growing up' is neither debilitating nor negative; it is a tool for the author to dismantle dominant gender ideologies.

*Orlando* is a rich and complex text that offers a unique perspective on queer gender. This chapter investigates the critical aspects at work in Woolf's artistry, starting with the influence of Modernism on style, form and content, and how narrative and genre operate differently when it is not only the content but also the organising structure itself which is queer, trans\* and feminist. The chapter then analyses and critiques the arguments Woolf raises in *Orlando* regarding gender, starting with Orlando's spontaneous transition in Turkey, her exploration of androgyny and her eventual journey back West, then moving on to interrogate the role of clothing in relation to the expression, performance and social regulation of gender. Finally, this chapter examines how Orlando "grows up" in relation to social expectations, a feminist sensibility and a queer perspective of multiplicity, fluidity and flux.

#### "Wild as the Wind": Modernist Literature

Being a Modernist text, *Orlando* both follows and defies many of the values of this early twentieth-century movement. One of the values of Modernism, as mentioned at the outset of Part Three, is the asking of questions and the refusal of answers – a value that is aptly reflected in the writing of this chapter, which leaves many questions unanswered. The literary critic Irving Howe insists that "for the modern writer" there are no assumptions held that "the

artist stands above his material, controlling it and aware of an impending resolution” or that “the artist has answers to his questions or that answers can be had” (55). Modernist writers present dilemmas and offer their struggles with them. Woolf shapes the narrative so that her readers, instead of asking *how* Orlando turned into a woman or *why* he turned into a woman, follow Woolf in questioning what *effect* this change has on Orlando’s life. “It is enough for us to state the simple fact; Orlando was a man till the age of thirty; when he became a woman and has remained so ever since” (466).

Where characters from the texts analysed in Parts One and Two can spend almost an entire novel exploring the specific challenges, technicalities and processes of gender transition, Orlando’s change occurs miraculously overnight, leaving the space of the whole of the rest of the novel to explore Orlando’s development and what it means to be a woman who used to be a man and who can be perceived as being both masculine and feminine as well as occupying a space between and outside this binary. The narrative establishes Orlando’s transformation into a woman very carefully, making the change appear as natural and as spontaneous as possible to the reader. The narrator depicts Orlando as being the exact same person as before her transition: “Orlando had become a woman . . . But in every other respect, Orlando remained precisely as he had been” (466). Woolf further situates the reality of Orlando’s transition by asserting that “[t]he change seemed to have been accomplished painlessly and completely and in such a way that Orlando herself showed no surprise at it” (466). Woolf limits the reader’s capacity to demand answers from the text, instead inviting acceptance of Orlando’s remarkable change and opening space for complexity to drive the narrative.

Another feature of Modernism prevalent across Woolf’s work is the impetus to experiment. The writer Katherine Mansfield declares that “opinion is united in declaring this [1910] to be an age of experiment” (107-8). Woolf experiments not only with content, form

and style but also with philosophical concepts such as the self. Irving Howe argues that, in the late stages of Modernism, “there occurs an emptying out of the self, a revulsion from the wearisomeness of both individuality and psychological gain” (49). Woolf is one of these Modernist writers who keeps “approaching—sometimes even penetrating—the limits of solipsism” (49). If solipsism is the theory that the self is all that can be known to exist, Woolf writes to subvert the belief that the self is static and consistent. “Character, for modernists like [James] Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and [William] Faulkner, is regarded not as a coherent, definable, and well-structured entity, but as a psychic battlefield, or an insoluble puzzle, or the occasion for a flow of perceptions and sensations” (Howe 56). Woolf writes to challenge style, sensibility and convention. She questions the nature of ‘truth,’ disrupts established literary patterns and narrates queer gender and sexual orientation in such a way as to subvert understandings of the self as singular and unchanging.

Modernist writers often write to subvert existing literary traditions and reshape the canon. The literary theorist Susan Stanford Friedman writes that Modernism “establishes a cult of the new that constructs retrospectively a sense of tradition from which it declares independence” (503). Virginia Woolf writes to destabilise and defy existing literary patterns and language structures. Howe argues that “for the great figures of literary modernism . . . a desire to create or perhaps recreate the very grounds of being, through a permanent revolution of sensibility and style . . . is the very essence of their task” (50). One way in which Woolf revolutionises literary tradition is through reimagining the bildungsroman, the conventional coming-of-age story. Traditionally, the bildungsroman reflects the “ideals of individual development, education and social integration” (Newman 115), concerning itself with “the process of formation as well as with finished form” (Newman 131) and commonly maintaining a connection with heterosexual romance and marriage (Peppis 103). The female bildungsroman, as Newman notes, “has always offered a vexed picture of development as a

conflict between the ideal of individual autonomy and the familial relationality which defines traditional female roles” (111). The Modernist bildungsroman, by contrast, seeks to dissolve these ideals, often privileging an ongoing process of formation (Newman 131), dismantling pre-existing structures and searching for new narrative possibilities. One of the significant ways in which Woolf challenges literary tradition is by reconceptualising notions of narrative linearity.

To construct a linear narrative, formal devices and features, including chronology, gradual change, unbroken succession, consistent pacing and the illusion of causal coherence combine to create the effect of a naturalised plot (Newman 113). *Orlando*, with “its sex change and inexplicable shifts in mode and tempo, as well as its frequent metafictional intrusions . . . is clearly non-linear” (Newman 113). “Orlando’s extreme longevity also wreaks havoc with the *Bildung* plot as a particularly integrated nexus of content and form” (Newman 114). A particularly noteworthy way in which Woolf disrupts the linearity and tradition of the bildungsroman plot is through her use of metafictionality and narrative perspective. Woolf narrates from the point of view of the ‘biographer’ and draws frequent attention to the construction of *Orlando* as a biography. She refers to “whatever sum the Hogarth Press may think proper to charge for this book” (529) and asks “what can the biographer do when his subject has put him in the predicament into which Orlando has now put us?” (Woolf 529). These metafictional intrusions not only function to disturb any suspension of disbelief that the reader might indulge in but they also disrupt the idea of the writer/biographer as someone who has control over the text. In this sense, the text maintains a lifeforce of its own. Although being shaped by the hand of its constructor, the text is not at the whim of the author/biographer; rather, the writer is at the whim of the protagonist, who fuels and defines the text.

The narrator therefore occupies an important role in disrupting patriarchal literary tradition, of which narrative linearity is but one convention. Notably, Woolf refers to the biographer with ‘he/him/his’ and ‘we/us’ pronouns throughout the text. Although the use of the vague third person plural pronoun ‘we’ requires closer examination, the use of the masculine third person singular pronoun functions to remind the reader that, historically, the literary tradition is dominated by men. Like Angela Carter, Woolf adopts “the narrative technique of ventriloquism – a female author speaking in a male voice” (Peach 111) to deconstruct the patriarchal literary tradition. In doing so, Woolf frees herself to subvert and play with literary traditions of the past even while maintaining her admiration of the great writers. As Jane de Gay points out, “[a]lthough there is some evidence of an ironic disdain for the weight of tradition . . . she also conveys a sense of intimacy with past literature” (132). This balance between admiration of and disregard for literary tradition enables Woolf to explore different modes of expression.

Significantly, the Preface to the novel provides lists of authors to whom Woolf expresses her gratitude: “no one can read or write without being perpetually in the debt of Defoe, Sir Thomas Browne, Sterne, Sir Walter Scott, Lord Macaulay, Emily Brontë, De Quincey, and Walter Pater – to name the first that come to mind” (Woolf 401). These lists “produce a context for her writing and our reading by setting up a narrative contract on the basis of shared literary experience” (Narayan 128). “Through this strategy, Woolf highlights the literariness rather than the veracity of her novel” (Narayan 129). Woolf takes this early opportunity to state that “the list threatens to grow too long and is already far too distinguished . . . it will inevitably wake expectations in the reader which the book itself can only disappoint” (401). Here, Woolf foreshadows the subversive quality of her novel, revealing that, although influenced by many illustrious figures in the literary canon, the text is unlike anything that has been written before. As the biographer, Woolf often draws attention

to the artifice involved in constructing both narrative and gender.

Although *Orlando* is fictional, the title claims it is a biography and, thus, Woolf disrupt her reader's investments in 'truth' – for instance, by telling her readers that, due to a lack of historical information, she must resort to speculation or must rely on the accounts of third parties (456). She argues that,

[t]o give a truthful account of London society at that or indeed at any other time, is beyond the powers of the biographer or the historian. Only those who have little need of the truth, and no respect for it – the poets and the novelists – can be trusted to do it, for this is one of the cases where the truth does not exist. Nothing exists. The whole thing is a miasma – a mirage. (Woolf 492)

In part, this use of metafictionality encourages Woolf's readers to not make conclusions about the events she details or proffer answers to the questions she raises. Even more importantly, Woolf grants herself permission to disrespect the rules of historical accuracy and 'truth,' drawing attention to the idea of 'truth' itself as a construct just like that of gender or literature. It is in this way that these metafictional intrusions and their dismantling of 'truth' play a significant role in keeping the text rooted in the literary:

[t]hroughout the narrative, the biographer-narrator reflects on the difficulty of writing a biography, especially for someone like Orlando who spends much of his/her time in solitude, thinking and writing. In this way the narrative keeps the focus on the writing itself as part and parcel of the subject's life. (Caughie 512)

The biographer's reflection on the challenges of writing a biography allows the reader to interpret the protagonist's relationship with writing in a similar way.

In a sense, *Orlando* is a narrative about writing about writing. Indeed, writing and literature are intrinsic to the overall narrative, with Orlando spending their entire life working on "The Oak Tree," the poem he starts as a young man, keeps pressed against her bosom in

her dress (535) for the few hundred years of its fabrication and finally finishes as a Modern woman. “The focus on literariness and narrative in Woolf’s text allows space for so-called deviance while also permitting the text to contain the radical space it opens up” (Narayan 133). Woolf therefore frees herself to unsettle literary convention while simultaneously paying homage to the literary traditions that preceded her. One of the significant freedoms Woolf embraces is the idea of literary tradition itself as ever-changing, which is best reflected by Orlando’s meeting with Nick Greene in the Victorian era, when she sets out to get her poem published. Nick Greene, who Orlando had initially met some two or three centuries before, tells her “ah! my dear lady, the great days of literature are over. Marlowe, Shakespeare, Ben Johnson – those were the giants. Dryden, Pope, Addison – those were the heroes. All, all are dead now. And whom have they left us? Tennyson, Browning, Carlyle!” (Woolf 534). Here, Orlando “could have sworn that she had heard him say the very same things three hundred years ago. The names were different, of course, but the spirit was the same” (Woolf 535). Orlando concludes that “Nick Greene had not changed, for all his knighthood. And yet, some change there was” (Woolf 535). What has not changed in Nick is his passion for the ‘great’ writers; what does change is the writers themselves.

Where Nick initially praised the great writers of Greek antiquity, he now praises the Early Modern writers he overlooked at the time they were writing. His view on ‘great’ writing is to “cherish the past” (Woolf 534). No doubt if he were to meet Orlando again in “the present moment” (543), Nick would praise the Victorian literary heroes of his past that he had scoffed at when they were contemporary. Here, Orlando makes a significant realisation about her previous disillusionment with literature:

Orlando was unaccountably disappointed. She had thought of literature all these years (her seclusion, her rank, her sex must be the excuse) as something wild as the wind, hot as fire, swift as lightning; something errant, incalculable, abrupt, and behold,

literature was an elderly gentleman in a grey suit talking about duchesses. (Woolf 535)

Orlando's realisation operates to defy the kind of literary tradition that Greene so highly values – that of predominantly middleclass Western white men whose voices exist in the past but demand to be heard in the present, even while new modes of expression are being explored by writers of “the present moment” (543). Orlando's disappointment with what she thought literature was reflects the wider impetus behind Woolf's work – the expectation that literature, like gender, should not conform or be static and predictable; if literature is to be taken as art, if it hopes to challenge tradition and do something different, it must indeed be as “wild as the wind” (535).

#### “Tampering with the Expected Sequence”: Queering Genre

Literary form holds great potential for shaping stories about experiences of gender. The literary theorist Patrick Colm Hogan argues that,

[l]ike so much of social life, our relation to gender is in part a function of the stories we tell and specifically the structures we use to shape those stories. Literature would appear to be particularly well suited to addressing such issues of emplotment (the shaping of diverse events and simulations into a story sequence). (Hogan 178)

The issue with so many contemporary popular representations of queer gender is that they use the same kinds of structures to tell the same kinds of stories, thus producing the impression that sameness can be used to define human experiences of gender and identity when, in fact, these experiences are diverse and multi-faceted. Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* disrupts this pattern of sameness by deconstructing and rewriting established traditions concerning literary structure and genre. Woolf takes the patriarchal literary tradition and approaches it with a queer, feminist, trans\* lens; she queers, feminises and transgenders literature itself.

Sam Slote's 2004 article on genre in *Orlando and Ulysses* examines the early twentieth-century French critic Louis Gillet's readings of gender and genre in Woolf and Joyce. Two of Gillet's arguments that Slote challenges are that "[g]ender determines, or engenders, genre" (Slote 29) and "that women are just the imitative gender" (Gillet 222; Slote 29). Slote explains that "calling women the 'imitative gender' implies that a defining characteristic of the female genre is a proclivity towards imitation, specifically imitation of the male *corpus*" (Slote 30; italics in original), which leads to two possible consequences. If the imitation is successful, "the woman has so effectively and cunningly imitated the man that she is no longer recognisable as a woman" (Slote 30-1), which "breaks down the efficacy of generic distinction" and renders genre "inoperative" (Slote 31). Conversely, "if the imitation is not an effective dissimulation . . . all that would happen is that the woman ultimately affirms her status *as a woman* by being an imperfect impersonator. In this way, their imitations would do nothing to imperil generic differentiation" (Slote 31; italics in original). Neither one of these outcomes suitably reflects how genre and gender operate in Woolf's *Orlando*.

Slote arrives at a similar conclusion, asserting that "[i]f not imitation then, Woolf seems to be concerned . . . that perhaps she might be considered as a member of the 'imitative gender'" (Slote 31). However, Woolf is not only writing to avoid being seen as a mere 'imitator;' she is also writing to challenge social expectations for female writers and to unsettle the traditional structures from which her predominantly male predecessors benefited. She is writing to challenge the tradition of imitation, which is not necessarily what defines feminine writing but might better be understood as a patriarchal expectation of writing, to which many writers, regardless of their gender, conform. As Orlando later discovers after reading an article by Nick Greene, which "plunged her into the depths of despair" (Woolf 539), the 'great' writers "made one feel . . . that one must always, always write like somebody else" (538). Woolf's desire as a writer appears to not only be to challenge this

tradition of imitation but to subvert it dramatically. As a woman, she has much to offer in destabilising the patriarchal literary tradition. The narrator of *Orlando* comments that “the truth is that when we write of a woman, everything is out of place – culminations and perorations; the accent never falls where it does with a man” (Woolf 549). In this sense, Woolf pre-empts a significant aspect of the feminist debates that emerge later in the twentieth century concerning women’s oppression within such dominant patriarchal structures as language.

Luce Irigaray asks, in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, “how can women analyze their own exploitation, inscribe their own demands, within an order prescribed by the masculine?” (Irigaray 81), insisting that women’s liberation requires “necessarily transforming the culture in its operative agency, language” (155). She further argues that

[i]f we keep on speaking the same language together, we’re going to reproduce the same history. . . . If we keep on speaking sameness, if we speak to each other as men have been doing for centuries, as we have been taught to speak, we’ll miss each other, fail ourselves. Again . . . Words will pass through our bodies, above our heads.

They’ll vanish and we’ll be lost. (Irigaray 205; first ellipses mine)

In this context, Woolf is writing to subvert the patriarchally oppressive expectations of literary tradition—or “‘masculine’ systems of representation” (Irigaray 85)—and to find new modes of expression that unsettle the sameness of the masculine hegemonic order. Moreover, Woolf writes to disrupt the ostensible ‘distinctions’ between such binaries as ‘male writer’ and ‘female writer’ or ‘fiction’ and ‘non-fiction,’ thus destabilising conventional understandings of both gender and genre.

Slote notes the “coincidence in the French word *genre* between gender (biological or cultural) and literary form” (Slote 29), opting to use the word *genre* to refer to either gender or genre or both gender and genre: “I am not suggesting that these are the same, but

rather that they share a trait in common, a generic trait, in that they both perform and enact distinctions (Epic vs. Lyric, skirts vs. trousers, XX vs. XY, etc)” (Slote 30). What Slote overlooks in this article is the spaces between and outside these binary distinctions, the very spaces, indeed, that Woolf brings to the fore in *Orlando*. According to Jacques Derrida, “[a]s soon as the word ‘genre’ is sounded, as soon as it is heard, as soon as one attempts to conceive it, a limit is drawn. And when a limit is established, norms and interdictions are not far behind” (Derrida 56). Woolf challenges these limits, norms and interdictions. She breaks the rules, draws attention to her breaking of the rules and sets about establishing her own literary patterns. According to Slote’s reading of Aristotle’s *Poetics*, “genre is not innate . . . Genre is chosen because of the way one is, because of one’s own predilections, which are then expressed by, or in, the selected genre” (Slote 30). Here, Slote could be referring to both literary genre and the cultural concept of gender. In this sense, Woolf’s *Orlando* operates to dismantle preconceived notions of both genre and gender as fixed, innate and conforming to a strict set of rules. If literary genre is shaped by the author’s gender and predilections, it is clear through Woolf’s experimentation with genre that she maintains a fluid, all-encompassing view of what it means to be a gendered person in society.

Louis Gillet’s claim, therefore, that “the moral of *Orlando* is that genre does not matter, that genre is insignificant” (Slote 32) could not be more wrong. Gender does matter and genre is significant. What is missing in Gillet’s critique is the idea that gender matters precisely because it is more than just a dichotomy instituted to perpetuate patriarchal order. Woolf’s use of bricolage in *Orlando* to refabricate pre-existing notions of genre works to reflect the multiplicity and diversity possible in human experience and identification as well as the significant literary possibilities for expression when dominant rules and structures are dismantled. Gillet’s belief “that the trait of distinction between the two genres [genders] does not signify anything, or at least does not signify anything of much importance” (Slote 32)

reveals a heteronormative ignorance about the multitudinous nature of difference. Orlando's crossing of boundaries not only in terms of gender and sex but also geographically, historically and literarily is key to understanding how Woolf's novel operates.

Caughie asserts that “[t]ransnarratives cross genres . . . [and] emphasize the artifice of gender, even while maintaining its naturalness” (503). In *Orlando*, this emphasis is also laid on the artifice of writing itself and how narrative can be constructed much in the same way as gender. It is therefore important to understand how “[t]he transsexual in *Orlando* is the narrative's organizing principle, not its subject” (Caughie 507). Where many of the popular fiction narratives about queer gender analysed in Parts One and Two focus on the challenges and processes of transition—such as being in the ‘wrong body’—and tend to position these representations within a familiar and conventional model, *Orlando* queers the very narrative itself, taking advantage of the subversive potential of ‘trans’ by crossing multiple borders and boundaries. Additionally, where trans\* characters such as Jake from the *Tales* series reach a space of ‘completion’ or finality, Orlando occupies a space of continuous becoming. Her journey is one of constant fluctuation, with an ongoing sense of “growing up” (484, 536) while hardly aging at all. She lives across the span of a few centuries, only reaching the age of 36 once she reaches “the present moment” (Woolf 543) in 1928. In this ‘present,’ Orlando's histories, memories, multiple selves and existences all collide and morph into one another: “it is an open question in what sense Orlando can be said to have existed at the present moment” (Woolf 547). Her thought process is contemplative, reflecting Woolf's stream of consciousness style, which invites disruption through its echoing of the fragmented quality of thought and memory.

Sandy Stone suggests in her 1991 landmark essay, “The Empire Strikes Back,” that transsexuals be considered “not as a class or problematic ‘third gender,’ but rather as a *genre* – a set of embodied texts whose potential for *productive* disruption of structured

sexualities and spectra of desire has yet to be explored” (231). As Caughie argues, this potential has been explored by Virginia Woolf in *Orlando* (Caughie 503). Caughie therefore adopts the term ‘transgenre’ to encompass the way *Orlando* “reconfigures in life writing narratives not only notions of gender but also of time, identity, history, and the very nature of writing and reading” (Caughie 502). “Transsexual life writing, as other scholars have noted, disrupts conventions of narrative logic by defying pronominal stability, temporal continuity, and natural progression. It thereby demands a new genre, a transnarrative” (Caughie 503). The transnarrative therefore holds potential to not only destabilise hegemonic understandings of gender and desire but also to reshape the literary tradition itself, to create new methods of expression. *Orlando* achieves this destabilisation in many ways. Although possessing a chronological narrative, the span of the text is exaggerated and historical elements are often displaced or overlapped in time. The natural progression is subverted through the fact that Orlando hardly ages – she develops and ‘grows up’ but does not achieve the kind of ‘completion’ or coming of age that the bildungsroman demands and that can be witnessed in the texts analysed in Parts One and Two of the thesis.

Caughie identifies that

Halberstam (*In a Queer Time and Place*), like Woolf, argues for changes in conceptions of narrative, not in order to get the story right, not to make the narrative match the body or the body match the narrative (as Jay Prosser argues transsexual narratives do)—that is, not in the name of the real or the authentic, but in order to disrupt our notions of the real and our investments in authenticity. (519)

Since Modernism can be understood as “a major rupture from what came before” (Friedman 426), Woolf’s writing is characterised largely by its impetus to disrupt. Woolf writes not only to dismantle preconceived notions of authenticity and realness concerning gender but also to deconstruct these notions in relation to narrative, history, fact, identity and the self. Most

importantly, Woolf writes to challenge the idea that the self is but a singular, unchangeable entity.

In her essay “Modern Novels,” Woolf posits:

[i]s it not possible that . . . if one were free and could set down what one chose, there would be no plot, little probability, and a vague general confusion in which the clear-cut features of the tragic, the comic, the passionate, and the lyrical were dissolved beyond the possibility of separate recognition? The mind, exposed to the ordinary course of life, receives upon its surface a myriad impressions – trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms, composing in their sum what we might venture to call life itself; and to figure further as the semi-transparent envelope, or luminous halo, surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. (30-7)

The freedom that Woolf refers to here can be understood as freedom from the weight of literary tradition and narrative convention. For Woolf, writing is not about establishing a clear-cut narrative within a specified set of genre conventions. This excerpt reveals the wider impetus behind Woolf’s writing: a desire for the written word to reflect the multi-faceted nature of the human mind, for genres to blur and meld in the same way that thoughts and sensations can be experienced simultaneously. In creating a narrative that refuses to conform to rigid and linear conventions, Woolf frees herself to interrogate the complexity of human experience and explore the way in which gender, identity and the self can exist in a constant state of flux.

#### Orlando: From ‘Man’ into ‘Woman’

On the seventh day of Orlando’s long sleep preceding his spontaneous change of sex, the Turks rise against the Sultan before “obscurity descends” (Woolf 464). Here, Woolf demonstrates her own impetus to create ambiguity and raise unanswerable questions. Of

obscurity she asserts: “would indeed that it were deeper! Would . . . that it were so deep that we could see nothing through its opacity!” (464). With this sense of obscuring answers, Woolf details a visit from the gods of Truth, Candour and Honesty and a ritualistic encounter with the Ladies of Purity, Chastity, and Modesty. Truth, Candour and Honesty, “who take watch and ward by the inkpot of the biographer” (464), insist upon “The Truth and nothing but the Truth!” (464), representing the kinds of figures one might meet in the publishing world who insist on sticking to facts and what is known about the life of the person being written about, instead of exploring the spaces between what is known. The interruption from the Ladies of Purity, Chastity and Modesty—figures who represent supposed ideals of femininity—entering Orlando’s chamber therefore “affords us a breathing space” (464). The biographer’s relief at not having to hear more about the importance of ‘Truth’ demonstrates another of the Modernist values that Woolf aligns with – the refusal to follow essentialist Romantic values. ‘Truth’ implies that there exists a single answer for whatever question is being asked. Woolf rejects this view of singularity, instead opting to embrace multiplicity, obscurity and the unknown.

The Ladies of Purity, Chastity and Modesty (otherwise referred to as the Sisters) seek to oppress Truth and threaten to kill Orlando so that “things that were better unknown and undone” may not come to light (465). Here, the sisters are referring to the threat that comes from understanding the ‘secrets’ of both femininity and masculinity. Indeed, in this sense, Orlando can be seen as the divine hermaphrodite – as a Rebis figure or the coming together of the two halves of the original human who, according to Greek Mythology, was initially created with four arms, four legs and a head with two faces but was split into two separate parts by Zeus, who feared the power of this dual creation. The Sisters hold a separate opinion from that which Truth’s trumpets blare forth; however, they do not share the biographer’s desire to explore other possibilities beyond truth. Chastity insists that, “[r]ather than let

Orlando wake, I will freeze him to the bone” (465). The Sisters, while rejecting truth (much like many Modernist writers and artists), also reject complexity, questions and the unknown. They see exploration in new territory as dangerous and would rather see Orlando die than let her navigate her way through her new sex and, eventually, her new gender(s). It is curious therefore that, upon realising that “he was a woman” (466), “Orlando remained precisely as he had been. The change of sex, though it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity” (466). Here, the biographer claims that Orlando’s identity does not change. Although identity does not alter instantly, it is not reflective of Orlando’s development over the course of the novel to say that her identity does not alter at all.

Simone de Beauvoir writes that “[o]ne is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (293). The shaping of identity is an intricate and organic process that occurs over time and, arguably, never stops developing. It is therefore important to note the shift of Orlando’s pronouns in the narrative here from ‘he/him’ to ‘they/their’ to ‘she/her.’ The neutral territory of third person plural pronouns is entered into briefly and left again after one short sentence when the biographer insists, parenthetically, that “in future we must, for convention’s sake say ‘her’ for ‘his,’ and ‘she’ for ‘he’” (Woolf 466). This parenthetical addition operates similarly to the other metafictional intrusions that occur throughout the narrative insofar that it draws the reader’s attention to the rules that govern narrative. Woolf’s brief shift to the plural, non-gendered pronoun ‘they’ marks a moment of rebellion, a disruption to the logical hegemonic order.

Narayan argues that this brief moment in plural, neutral territory “exhibits an uncertainty which is not strictly a part of the play that marks the rest of the text” (129). In fact, uncertainty and ambiguity play significant roles in *Orlando*, particularly the fluctuation that occurs between the certain and the uncertain, the known and the unknown; this balance contributes significantly to Woolf’s destabilisation of gender and genre. The use of the

pronoun 'they' therefore emphasises the ambiguity that Woolf plays with in *Orlando* and highlights the experimental approach that she takes to her writing. Yet, it is curious that the change of sex demands an almost immediate switch to congruently gendered pronouns, especially considering how Orlando's identification as a woman comes later in the narrative after a significant period of androgyny, social preparation and gender contemplation. From a twenty-first century perspective, it would be easy to critique Woolf writing in 1928 for leaving behind the non-gendered pronouns so soon. Given Orlando's ongoing fluctuations of gender and sex, it would seem appropriate to return to these pronouns later in the narrative when Orlando's gender reaches a more fluid, all-encompassing space.

Newman argues that even "[t]he most traditional use of the *Bildung* plot can be disruptive if the protagonist's identity deviates somehow from expectations" (Newman 112). Orlando defies multiple expectations, particularly those concerning a consistent, congruent and static gender identity. Although the protagonist's pronouns are destabilised by shifting from 'he' to 'she' and 'him' to 'her,' with a brief stop at 'their' in between, a degree of pronominal stability is maintained in the structure of the narrative insofar as Orlando's pronouns do not fluctuate back and forth or return to the gender-non-specific third person plural. The rigid consistency of the feminine third person singular pronoun from this point in the narrative reduces the effect of the disruptive structures at work in this text by conforming to the convention of pronominal stability dictated by patriarchal models of discourse. Since Orlando's identity is far more multiple than just 'she,' it is possible to see how creative license with 'they/them' pronouns, which are now more commonly used in contemporary vernacular, could do much to emphasise the shifting nature of her gender (and sex).

According to Helt, "*Orlando* disputes this notion that gender has a biological essence" (Helt 121). "Woolf shows that what it means to be man or woman depends on social conditions, and these conditions differ based on the biological sex of the body" (Helt 120).

The fact that Orlando is confirmed to be a woman through her biology is problematic for the many non-congruent transgender and gender variant people that exist in the world, since biology does not necessarily define gender; however, it does help the reader to understand what has happened. Since Orlando has a “change of sex” (466), the fact that she is a woman is apparently irrefutable. Indeed, Woolf’s depiction of it as something that ‘just happened’ demystifies the spontaneous transition. This inexplicable, unexplainable and spontaneous transition from a man into a woman operates very differently from the transition narratives analysed in Parts One and Two of the thesis. As Caughie eloquently puts it, “Orlando’s life suggests that the transsexual’s watchword might not be ‘I’m trapped in the wrong body’ but ‘I’m sick to death of this particular self. I want another’” (Caughie 513; Woolf 548). This idea of multiplicity is central to *Orlando*.

The staging of Orlando’s sex change is essential for Woolf’s exploration of sex, gender, identity and multiplicity. Newman notes that, “[w]hat is most significant about the transformation is not its effect in propelling or impeding Orlando’s self-formation but, rather, its lack of consequence for her gender and sexuality” (116). The fact that Orlando “remained precisely as he had been” (Woolf 466) highlights how “the transformation happens *to* the body and affects biological sex rather than cultural gender and sexuality” (Newman 110). Although Orlando becomes a woman, anatomically speaking, it is neither accurate to state that she identifies immediately as a woman nor to insist that she “remained so ever since” (Woolf 466). Here, then, identity is not defined by the body, at least not instantly; instead, “gender and sexuality are constructed over time through an array of institutions and discourses” (Caughie 518), in which the body plays a small but significant role. Orlando’s change of sex therefore emphasises “not transition from one thing to another but transformation over time” (Caughie 518) and in relation to society, culture, history, law, psychology, medicine and fashion. Particularly significant is the way Woolf refuses to

present Orlando's change of sex as the discovery of her 'real' self. Rather, the sex change allows the exploration of an ongoing process of growth. Instead of remaining a woman, as the narrator implies will be Orlando's fate following her transition, Orlando experiences fluctuations in her identity that resist the hegemonic model of a static, consistent, 'true' self.

Woolf's novel functions to resist dominant gender ideologies. It "shies from treating these categories [of sex and gender, body and mind] as stable binaries or dialectic oppositions destined to a final synthesis, presenting them instead as interpenetrating aspects of an ever-changing mosaic self" (Newman 121). *Orlando* rejects the idea of a unified self in favour of a "great variety of selves" (Woolf 548), exploring how these selves can operate in relation to one another:

the conscious self, which is the uppermost, and has the power to desire, wishes to be nothing but one self. This is what some people call the true self, and it is, they say, compact of all the selves we have it in us to be; commanded and locked up by the Captain self, the Key self, which amalgamates and controls them all. (548)

Although this statement appears to corroborate the Romantic notions of truth and essentialism that *Orlando* primarily rejects, it is impossible to say what Orlando's 'true' self is; she does not possess an overriding, uppermost self that amalgamates and controls her many other selves. Rather, she is open to the natural oscillation between her multiple selves, permitting whichever conscious self is uppermost to pursue its desires without expressing the need for a singular, unified self. Orlando is not only both man and woman but also "a mosaic of young and old parts" (Newman 125); she is aging and non-aging, old and young, living in the past, present and future all at the same time. In occupying simultaneous plains of existence, Orlando's "experiential richness and diversity is also concurrent: at any given moment Orlando inhabits several simultaneous development plots" (Newman 121) and timelines. Time and age are both fluid for her: "there are (at a venture) seventy-six different times all

ticking in the mind at once” (Woolf 547) and “[t]he true length of a person’s life . . . is always a matter of dispute” (Woolf 546-7).

Even as a young man, preceding the transition, Orlando identifies the “extraordinary discrepancy between time on the clock and time in the mind” (Woolf 444):

[i]t would be no exaggeration to say that he would go out after breakfast a man of thirty and come home to dinner a man of fifty-five at least. Some weeks added a century to his age, others no more than three seconds at most. Altogether, the task of estimating the length of human life . . . is beyond our capacity, for directly we say this it is ages long, we are reminded that it is briefer than the fall of a rose leaf to the ground . . . Life seemed to him of prodigious length. Yet even so, it went like a flash. (Woolf 445)

In occupying a space of both youth and age, in experiencing simultaneously the quickness and slowness of time, Orlando’s early experiences of life provide a hint to the way in which Orlando’s self is shaped by multiplicity, fluidity and ambiguity.

#### **Liminality and Androgyny: Crossing Bodies and Borders**

Orlando’s passage back to England is both a physical journey across the Mediterranean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean and an internal journey through her thoughts and feelings about her place in the world. In a sense, the ship Orlando travels on operates as a microcosm for British society, affording her the time and space to leave one life behind and prepare to enter another. The liminal space of the *Enamoured Lady*—ships always travel between places but rarely stay long in any of them—enables Orlando to contemplate the liminal space of gender that she occupies until the conclusion of the trip, and prepares Orlando for her re-entry into British society. It is during this journey that she contrasts her relatively androgynous life amongst the classless Turkish gypsies with the kinds of expectations that will be placed on her once she returns to upper-class society on British soil. After much contemplation, and

towards the end of her trip, Orlando arrives somewhere on the spectrum of feminine identification – “for she was speaking more as a woman speaks than as a man, yet with a sort of content after all” (476). In learning to speak as a woman, Orlando embraces the role she must perform to be accepted as an upper-class lady in England. Orlando realises she identifies as a woman; although her consideration of the imposed societal expectations of England in the 1700s does imply that she has no choice but to assimilate into the role of a woman, just as Eve does in *The Passion of New Eve*.

It is not until Orlando inhabits the decks of the *Enamoured Lady* to travel back to England that her gender identity starts to form. The liminal space of the ship affords Orlando the space in which to be codified as an English Lady. Indeed, the name of the ship itself projects expectations upon Orlando’s femininity. For, the narrator dryly notes, “when we are writing the life of a woman, we may, it is agreed, waive our demand for action, and substitute love instead. Love, the Poet has said, is woman’s whole existence” (Orlando 530). If the expectation of a lady is that she must be enamoured, then she must be enamoured with her husband, her child, her home and herself. Thus, aboard a ship whose very name purports a significant Western expectation for femininity, Orlando considers the other expectations she must face and contemplates her sex and chastity, “which, for one who had never given the matter a thought, was strange” (477). She experiences a start:

[b]ut that start was not of the kind that might have been expected. It was not caused, that is to say, simply and solely by the thought of her chastity and how she could preserve it. In normal circumstances a lovely young woman alone would have thought of nothing else; the whole edifice of female government is based on that foundation stone; chastity is their jewel, their centrepiece, which they run mad to protect, and die when ravished of. (Woolf 473)

Despite the fact that during the time of *Orlando's* conception a woman's virginity or chastity "was considered a precious commodity and to lose it, if one was not married, could plunge a woman and her whole family into the lowest depths of the social strata" (Melita 125), Orlando is not startled by the realisation that she must now learn to protect her chastity; in fact, she is startled by the significance of her sex and how it will shape her own performances and behaviours as well as those of others.

Sitting on the deck of the *Enamoured Lady*, on her way back to England, Orlando realises

[i]t is a strange fact, but a true one, that up to this moment she had scarcely given her sex a thought. Perhaps the Turkish trousers which she had hitherto worn had done something to distract her thoughts; and the gypsy women, except in one or two important particulars, differ very little from the gypsy men. At any rate, it was not until she felt the coil of skirts about her legs and the Captain offered, with the greatest politeness, to have an awning spread for her on deck, that she realised with a start the penalties and privileges of her position. (Woolf 473)

It is thus during her passage to England that Orlando contemplates how accepted forms of dress might inhibit her or force her into a submissive role of femininity. After fleeing her masculine role as ambassador in Turkey and living a relatively genderless life in the Turkish hills—donning "those Turkish coats and trousers which can be worn indifferently by either sex" (467)—with a group of gypsies, Orlando finally has an opportunity to consider what it means to be an upper-class lady in 1700s Britain. The journey from East to West (as well as from rural to urban space) is where Orlando's gender shifts from a place of androgyny and liminality to a space of feminine congruence and conformity. Her understanding of her role as a Western lady of rank is shaped both in relation to her understanding of Western men and

in contrast to the androgynous clothing customs and fluid, mobile lives of the Turkish gypsies.

In understanding that “what it means to be a man or woman depends on social conditions” (Helt 120), it is important to interrogate what it is about these social conditions that impacts gender. In *Undoing Gender* (2004), Judith Butler emphasises the importance of this social dimension of gender, arguing that “[g]ender is not exactly what one ‘is’ nor is it precisely what one ‘has’” (42). She asserts that gender is not just expressed through performance but is actively created by performance. Gender can thus be understood as a set of repeated acts performed on and by the body (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 33). The choices available to an individual in terms of how they can style the body are often restricted by social conditions and expectations. In this sense, “gender is made to comply with a model of truth and falsity which not only contradicts its own performative fluidity, but serves a social policy of gender regulation and control” (“Performative Acts” 528). The binary of man/woman assists in the regulation of this model of truth and falsity, imposing stereotypes about what it means to be a ‘real’ man or a ‘real’ woman and enforcing the idea of how “to do their gender right” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 140).

Social conditions thus dictate specific roles that are deemed suitable for a man or a woman, roles that typically oppress women and favour men. The ideas, for instance, that men wear pants and women wear skirts, that men work to generate income and women belong in the domestic space to care for the home and family, are expectations that have been historically reinforced around the world in patriarchal societies. Orlando’s journey from East to West affords a space to consider how differences in social conditions can influence differences in gendered thought and performances. Orlando's life with the gypsies reflects the kinds of matriarchal societies that preceded class division, the splitting of labour and the introduction of patriarchal rule (Feinberg, *Warriors* 51-53). Labour is distributed fairly

among the gypsies, regardless of gender. The ambiguously gendered clothing they all wear operates to unify them as a people rather than split them according to binary gender. It is in this way that Orlando's life with the gypsies can be considered androgynous and fluid, as not being restricted by any social expectation to perform the role of either a man or woman.

During Orlando's journey, she shifts from the masculine upper-class role as ambassador in Constantinople, to the relatively androgynous life with the classless gypsies who farm the Turkish hills, to her exploration of British expectations of upper-class femininity. Orlando's time with the Turkish gypsies operates as a significant part of her identity formation. Orlando's relationship with the geography, the dry surrounding hills, makes her feel homesick for the greener, more familiar landscapes of her youth and helps prompt her return home. More importantly, however, is the role she occupies while living with the gypsies. In this small, rural farming community, labour is divided evenly, regardless of sex or gender. Everybody wears the same kind of clothing, loose trousers and coats that allow for the freedom of movement required to conduct physical work and live a lifestyle of mobility. Although this depiction of clothing is not necessarily accurate of the time and place in the text, it does reflect the social and cultural values of the time that Woolf was writing, since the 1920s was an era in which fashion changed dramatically for women and began to accommodate more active lifestyles. The space of the Turkish hills therefore functions as a tool for Woolf to comment not only on the differences of gendered expectations between East and West, urban and rural but also on the different roles that class identities play in shaping gender.

In the Turkish hills, community priorities are focussed on survival – they must work hard in order to live. Thus, preoccupations with gender differences become insignificant. By contrast, the upper-class, high society city life that Orlando initially returns to in Britain is one in which she is expected to play a very different role from the one she performed as a

man. Priorities here are not about survival but about appropriate appearances and social etiquette. Yet, as a woman of high class and financial security, Orlando is afforded the rare freedom (of the time, 1700s) to shape her own life. It is only through her rank that she possesses the independence to explore her identity in a way that defies the domestic feminine role of lady she might otherwise be expected to conform to. Orlando is able to explore and sustain a fluid identity thanks to her class privilege. Since she has no need to work for her survival, no obligation to care for a husband or family, no need to get married to support herself, and is equipped with a household full of staff to take care of domestic matters for her, Orlando has the time, space and freedom to explore her identity. No longer employed in the court or in other matters of the crown, she can choose how to spend her time. Her choices (to pursue life and a lover) are highly reflective of the 1920s era in which the novel is written, a time characterised by the pursuit of pleasure, fulfilment and self-expression.

When Orlando begins her re-entry into British society, she starts to realise the ways in which she will be expected to conform to patriarchal expectations of femininity in England during the 1700s – to wear dresses, pour tea for men, be pursued by men and to please men.

In *Orlando*,

Constantinople plays the role of an androgynous, Othered space. The relation between fashion and gender—a relationship particularly strong in England—breaks down in the East, allowing Orlando to wear non-gendered clothing and to act in ways which transgress typical gender roles. (Beeber 104)

The East affords a space in which to unsettle binary Western expectations of gender performance and expression. The gypsies are depicted as possessing more liminal and androgynous ideas about gender. The freedom that the gypsies experience in the Turkish hills reflects a British view about the kinds of liberties that can be enjoyed in the East but it also marks a difference not only between class-based and classless roles but also between urban

living and rural living, a difference which warrants closer investigation in terms of geographies of inclusion and exclusion. Orlando's time of gendered liminality in the hills of Turkey, where gender roles and clothing are both relatively androgynous, permits Orlando to consider and critique the constraints of gender roles in her home country. However, since "there is no evidence to suggest that the fashion or culture of Turkey or the Ottoman Empire was ever more androgynous than that of England" (Beeber 104), Woolf's portrayal of the East as androgynous therefore functions as a satirisation and critique of the Victorian literary tradition that portrayed the East as feminised, androgynous and Sapphic (Beeber 104). Furthermore, Woolf's purposeful disregard for cultural and historical accuracy once again disrupts the patriarchal literary tradition that values 'truth,' facts and realism.

The Victorian literary tradition of Orientalising can be understood according to "the concept of xenotopia, which casts foreign places as feminine, linked with virginity, and ready to be conquered" (Beeber 107). As Beeber notes,

one element of Orientalism is the practice of displaying anxiety-inducing elements of a society (such as female sexuality) onto the colonized Other. The East thereby becomes a blank space, able to be filled in the colonizer's mind with what is paradoxically both threatening and erotic. (Beeber 107)

If female sexuality is a threat and the unknown is treated as Other, it therefore follows that queer gender—especially androgynous gender—is at once threatening, erotic and other. Yet, the threats that Orlando poses to binary, heteronormative Western society are not left behind in the West. Orlando returns to Britain as a feminised, sexualised and Sapphic being. Even though her gender presentation initially conforms to societal standards of femininity, her return from the East carries with it her sexual freedom and the potential to queer society. In addition to satirising the Orientalizing Victorian literary tradition, Woolf blurs the divide between masculinity and femininity, thus disrupting established patriarchal models of

dichotomous gender. Having explored an androgynous ‘Eastern’ alternative to binary gender in Western culture, Woolf is able to critique and analyse the way in which clothing can dictate one’s role in society and how societal conditions can influence gender roles.

Helt argues that “living corporeally as both a man and a woman and being understood by one’s society and one’s intimates as one and then the other” can lead a person to obtaining an androgynous mind (Helt 121). Yet, “the necessity of always being treated as one or the other would cause a person to think predominantly as one or the other. Because a body will always be interpellated as either male or female, even the sex-changing Orlando can partake only fleetingly of an androgynous mind” (Helt 121). Through experiencing both femininity and masculinity, one can also become androgynous; however, since binary social norms dictate that male and female are the only options for gendered existence, experiences of androgynous, ambiguous or shifting gender will be exposed to social regulation, which contributes to the suppression of nonconforming gender expression. Orlando’s experience of androgyny is fleeting because, as soon as she returns to England, she is expected to fulfil the role of a woman – to oversee the care of the domestic space, to marry a man, to have babies. Yet, Orlando discovers that these roles do not suit her – at least, not immediately. Despite initially accepting a feminine role, Orlando brings with her to England her experiences of and thoughts about androgyny from Turkey and her journey aboard the *Enamoured Lady*, which lead to her embracing a space of fluidity and multiplicity in her gender and identity.

#### Clothing, Performance and the Social Regulation of Gender Expectations

Since trousers are represented as “a symbol of androgyny and sexual freedom in the East, a symbol especially powerful in the imaginations of Victorian women for whom the trousers might appear mannish in comparison to burdensome crinolines” (Beeber 106), the cumbersome skirts Orlando finds herself in on the deck of the *Enamoured Lady* reflect the way women—as well as their actions and sexualities—are restricted by and contained within

their dress. Indeed, it is the coil of skirts around Orlando's legs and the offer from the ship's captain to spread an awning for her that highlight the "penalties and privileges of her position" (Woolf 473). Orlando thus spends the rest of the voyage contemplating what it means to be a woman in relation to the society she is due to re-enter. Orlando first considers the advantages and restrictions of the clothing she must wear as an Englishwoman of rank:

these skirts are plaguey things to have about one's heels. Yet the stuff (flowered paduasoy) is the loveliest in the world. Never have I seen my own skin...look to such advantage as now. Could I, however, leap overboard and swim in clothes like these?

No! Therefore, I should have to trust to the protection of the blue-jacket. (473)

Orlando's realisation that her burdensome skirts would prevent her from being able to swim and save herself if she fell overboard leads her to consider her role in relation to men. For, only men (in this case, the crew of the *Enamoured Lady*) are dressed suitably enough for diving overboard and rescuing silk-laden ladies. Concluding that her life rests in the more freely-clothed arms of the 'blue-jackets,' Orlando asks herself "must I then begin to respect the opinion of the other sex, however monstrous I think it? If I wear skirts, if I can't swim, if I have to be rescued by a blue-jacket, by God!" (Woolf 474).

Aware now of the limitations enforced upon her by her mode of dress, as dictated by her sex and social expectations of femininity, Orlando begins to consider the other aspects of being a woman that society might expect her to conform to. When offered, by the captain, a small amount of fat from a slice of corned beef, Orlando resists, likening her interaction with the captain to all interactions between men and women. She characterises it as a process of fleeing and pursuing, of resisting and yielding, which reflects "the male and female social roles in courtship" (Hogan 199). She enjoys the game she believes women are expected to play—of resisting such bodily pleasures as over-eating—and takes on the role so many

women assume when they want to watch their figures (or want to *appear* like they are watching their figures). Orlando refuses the tiny slice of fat and watches the captain frown. She then accepts it—“she would, if he wished it, have the very thinnest, smallest shiver in the world” (474)—and sees him smile. After dinner she concludes that nothing “is more heavenly than to resist and to yield; to yield and to resist” (474), enjoying her role as a woman who can influence this man’s feelings. She realises a new power that she possesses as a woman – the power to manipulate men’s responses to and feelings towards her. Simply by saying ‘no,’ and then making an exception for the captain, Orlando has the power to make him like her or make him think that she likes him.

In this scenario, however, the book does not spend any time considering whether Orlando really wants a slice of the fat or not. As Hogan eloquently puts it, “[i]t may be pleasing to be coaxed to eat, but it is not all pleasing to have to rely on such coaxing when one is hungry” (199). Perhaps then, the entire interaction is based upon the captain’s expectation that she will say ‘no’ but his hope that she will say ‘yes.’ Does he then have the power, in this instance, to manipulate the kinds of responses Orlando has available to her? What if Orlando indeed wants a larger slice of the fat but feels restricted by masculine expectations of feminine consumption? Here it is possible to see the “limitations of confinement to the reactive role of being pursued rather than the proactive role of pursuing” (Hogan 199). For a text that invests itself so heavily in desire, *Orlando* leaves a space open here in which to question the relationship between feminine appetite, desire and sexuality. The exchange between Orlando and the captain at dinner is based on the gendered expectations they have for one another regarding proactive and passive roles. Woolf thus opens a complex argument about the gendered interactions between men and women that encourages the reader to critique societal expectations of gendered behaviour. What would have happened, for instance, if Orlando had asked for a slice of the fat before it had been

offered to her? Perhaps, even now, in her early stages of womanhood, she understands that it is not socially acceptable for a woman to be so forward. She is already inhibited by her gender even in such an everyday circumstance as eating and the only autonomy she can regain for herself is through that which is offered to her by a man. It is thus no surprise that she makes a game out of accepting a slice of the fat; otherwise she would be obliged to keep saying no until it exhausted her.

Orlando's consideration of the kinds of behaviour she is expected to engage in leads her to think about how she must present herself. She remembers how, when she was a young man, "she insisted that women must be obedient, chaste, scented and exquisitely apparelled" (474). She realises that "[n]ow I must pay in my own person for those desires . . . for women are not (judging by my own short experience of the sex) obedient, chaste, scented, and exquisitely apparelled by nature" (474). Unlike many transgender characters in popular fiction, who often claim a sense of having always known that they identified in a gender other than the one assigned to them at birth, Orlando's experience of gender is very different. As a man, he had no feelings of femininity or identification as a woman. As a boy at the very onset of the novel, he is introduced as performing the stereotypically masculine martial activity of "slicing at the head of a Moor" (403). Orlando's expectations for what the role of a woman should be are informed by her previous perspective as a man. By expecting other women to be obedient, chaste, scented and exquisitely apparelled, Orlando thus enforces these qualities on herself. Orlando then feels frustrated and impatient with how much time she will have to spend acquiring these desired qualities: "[t]hey can only attain these graces, without which they may enjoy none of the delights of life, by the most tedious discipline" (474). Orlando's thinking leads the reader into a space of contemplation about the roles and expectations of women in Western society. She realises the significant amount of work that is put into feminine performance and making it appear 'natural.' She embraces this work, however,

feeling a duty to present herself in a way that pleases men and is deemed acceptable by society.

Orlando's understanding of the "sacred responsibilities of womanhood" further develops when she nearly sends a sailor to his death because he witnesses a glimpse of her ankle. This event leads Orlando to a wistful contemplation of all the things she may no longer do:

I shall never be able to crack a man over the head, or tell him he lies in his teeth, or draw my sword and run him through the body, or sit among my peers, or wear a coronet, or walk in procession, or sentence a man to death, or lead an army, or prance down Whitehall on a charger, or wear seventy-two different medals on my breast.  
(475)

She realises that her role in life, once she steps foot on English soil, will be to pour tea and to "ask my lords how they like it" (475). Here, Orlando realises "how low an opinion she was forming of the other sex, the manly, to which it had once been her pride to belong" (475). She remarks on how foolish it is for a man to fall from seeing a woman's ankle and how "[men] deny a woman teaching lest she may laugh at you" (475). Orlando's train of thought leads her to a space of ambiguity, where her critical perspective of the sexes and what they are expected to do leads her to feel a lack of identification with both masculinity and femininity: "here it would seem from some ambiguity in her terms that she was censuring both sexes equally, as if she belonged to neither; and indeed, for the time being, she seemed to vacillate; she was a man; she was a woman; she knew the secrets, shared the weaknesses of each" (475). As Orlando contemplates the societal expectations imposed upon people's behaviour relating to their genders, she finds "each [sex] alternately full of the most deplorable infirmities, and was not sure to which she belonged" (475). It is through her uncertainty about

and displeasure with gender roles and expectations that Orlando remains in a space of liminality for the remainder of her voyage.

Orlando concludes that she might better “enjoy the most exalted raptures known to the human spirit” (476) through being a woman. Her belief is that, as a woman, she can engage more deeply in acts of contemplation, solitude and love. However, as soon as she starts to think about love, she realises that the kind of love she wishes to pursue is distinct from the kind of love she is expected to have – that is, for hearth and home, husband and offspring. Her desires reveal themselves to her and, “though she herself was a woman, it was still a woman she loved; and if the consciousness of being of the same sex had any effect at all, it was to quicken and deepen those feelings which she had had as a man” (476). Later, “Orlando professed great enjoyment in the society of her own sex” (Woolf 504). Her sexual orientation develops to include not only men but also to include a newfound understanding of what it means to be a woman who loves other women. Orlando’s attraction to women is made stronger by her own experience of womanhood. Through being a woman herself, she expresses a better understanding of Sasha that she had not possessed when she was a man:

[f]or now a thousand hints and mysteries became plain to her that were then dark.

Now, the obscurity, which divides the sexes and lets linger innumerable impurities in its gloom, was removed, and if there is anything in what the poet says about truth and beauty, this affection gained in beauty what it lost in falsity. At last, she cried, she knew Sasha as she was. (476)

In becoming a woman, embracing her femininity and recognising that she is still attracted to women, Orlando transcends her previous experiences of loving women and finds herself in an exalted position of understanding. Having been a man who has become a woman, she threatens the so-called division of the sexes and becomes a figure of all-knowing wisdom and all-encompassing desire.

Once Captain Bartolus announces the presence of the Cliffs of England ahead of them, the reader starts to witness subtle changes in Orlando despite the biographer's initial insistence that "Orlando remained precisely as he had been" (466). These changes start to take shape now that her situation and geography are about to change. The return to England "forces Orlando to reflect on the change she has undergone. In England she loses the gender fluidity she had enjoyed in Constantinople" (Narayan 130). Although Orlando does not necessarily lose her gender fluidity—it redevelops as the narrative progresses—she must leave the liminal space of the ship behind and step onto English soil as a lady who meets social expectations. In this sense, "it is not differences in minds that produce differences in behaviors, which in turn creation social situations. Rather, differences in social situations produce differences in behaviors, leading to differences in thoughts and feelings" (Hogan 177). Orlando considers the restrictions imposed upon her as a woman: "if it meant conventionality, meant slavery, meant deceit, meant denying her lover, fettering her limbs, pursing her lips, and restraining her tongue, then she would turn about with the ship and set sail once more for the gypsies" (477). Overwhelmed by the potential ways in which she could be repressed as a woman in England, Orlando

considers leaving England and her noble class to return to Turkey as a gypsy. This projected solution implies that the problem is one that can be left behind. It is not a core crisis of identity but a resolvable crisis of culture and location; the problem is located in the western world and not in Orlando. (Narayan 130)

She acknowledges all the limitations society enforces upon her based on her sex, yet she still goes home. The return to England is an essential step in her journey, since it is not until Orlando returns home that she starts to 'grow up,' her gender starts to take shape and certain changes begin to manifest themselves in her. Significantly, Orlando reflects on the intrinsic role that clothes have in shaping gender.

### Perceptions of Gender: “The change of clothes had much to do with it”

Orlando comes to realise the potential of clothing to not only operate as an external signifier that reflects identity but also to influence identity:

what was said a short time ago about there being no change in Orlando the man and Orlando the woman, was ceasing to be altogether true. She was becoming a little more modest, as women are, of her brains, and a little more vain, as women are, of her person. Certain susceptibilities were asserting themselves, and others were diminishing. The change of clothes had, some philosophers will say, much to do with it. Vain trifles as they seem, clothes have, they say, more important offices than merely to keep us warm. (Woolf 490)

One of the important arguments that Woolf's *Orlando* makes is that gender is neither defined by an essential self nor determined by one's biology. “There are characteristics of gender, though they are not tied to sex; rather, they may vary from individual to individual” and from context to context (Hogan 200). The changes Orlando experiences in relation to her gender can therefore be thought of as developing in response to her environment and the way she is treated or expected to behave when she is perceived as a woman. The notion that women should be modest of their brains and vain of their persons is just one example of a gendered stereotype that Orlando internalises and conforms to out of an impetus to meet with social expectations. Similar changes occur in Orlando that demonstrate how her sex and her beliefs about her gendered role in society inform the performance of her gender. The narrator's remark that “she was still awkward in the arts of her sex” (487) is carefully set up to offer a societal critique about the way in which women regulate their own gender performance. Orlando's expectations over herself to participate in conventional feminine activities highlights the way in which she conforms to certain societal expectations of femininity.

Soon after arriving at her country estate home, Orlando is subjected to the opinions of her housekeeper, Mrs Grimstitch, and the chaplain, Mr Dupper, regarding the role Orlando will be expected to play now that she is the woman of the house. Mrs Grimstitch insists that “what with the towels wanting mending and the curtains in the chaplain’s parlour being moth-eaten round the fringes, it was time they had a mistress among them” (482). Mr Dupper goes as far as to bring up the “delicate matter” of “some little masters and mistresses to come after her” (482). It is therefore no surprise that some changes occur in Orlando with so many people expecting her to fit into stereotypical roles of femininity. However, Orlando does not fit a generic mould of womanhood. She is subversive through her love for women, her desire for independence, her enjoyment of cross-dressing and male performance, and her resistance to certain feminine stereotypes: “[a] plague on women . . . they never leave one a moment’s peace. A more fettering, inquisiting, busybodying set of people don’t exist” (486). Orlando’s transformation into a woman is thus a complex balancing act between resisting and internalising different modes of femininity.

Butler writes that “the action of gender requires a performance that is *repeated*. This repetition is at once a re-enactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation” (*Gender Trouble* 140; italics in original). The way in which Orlando repeats a variety of gender performances reflects the multiplicity which defines her queer gender. Orlando undergoes a great deal of change over the course of the novel. The fact that these changes are predominantly attributed to “[t]he change of clothes” demonstrates how heavily presentation, perceptions and performance influence understandings of identity: “[Clothes] change our view of the world and the world’s view of us” (490). Having worn the ambiguously gendered trousers of the Turkish gypsies, Orlando now occupies a position in which she is able to critique and experiment with binary clothing expectations in Western society. Orlando’s discovery of the

impeding nature of skirts is particularly significant in the context of women's oppression but also raises an important argument about how her appearance can influence the behaviours and performances of others in relation to her. Orlando reasons that, when Captain Bartolus saw her skirts,

he had an awning stretched for her immediately, pressed her to take another slice of beef, and invited her to go ashore with him in the long-boat. These compliments would certainly not have been paid her had her skirts, instead of flowing, been cut tight to her legs in the fashion of breeches. And when we are paid compliments, it behoves us to make some return. Orlando curtsied; she complied; she flattered the good man's humours as she would not have done had his neat breaches been a woman's skirts, and his braided coat a woman's satin bodice. (Woolf 490)

This argument requires close examination in relation to a contemporary Western context, where trousers and pants are worn liberally by many women. Perhaps skirts continue to influence 'gentlemanly' behaviours today. In the context of *Orlando*, however, this argument is situated circa 1700—a time when fashion norms dictated a binary distinction between men and women—but written in 1928, a time of expectations as well as resistance and change. The expectation that a man wears clothing designed for his sex and a woman wears clothing made for her sex perpetuates a binary norm in society that reinforces hegemonic patriarchal order.

According to Leslie Feinberg, one of the earliest written edicts against cross-dressing can be found in Deuteronomy (49): “[a] woman shall not wear a man's garment, nor shall a man put on a woman's cloak, for whoever does these things is an abomination to the LORD your God” (*Holy Bible*, Deut. 22.5). These explicit laws, Feinberg explains, came about from a need to consolidate patriarchal rule (*Warriors* 51). In the specific context of Deuteronomy, “wealthy Hebrew males . . . were very much concerned about making distinctions between

women and men, and eliminating any blurring or bridging of those categories” (51). Of course, this consolidation of patriarchal order does not only occur in Deuteronomy. The division of classes, which was “responsible for the growth of [patriarchal] laws that placed new boundaries across bodies, self-expression, and desire – as well as fencing off property and wealth” (51), is a phenomenon that “took place in societies all over the world” (51). With this strict historical tradition of imposed fashion expectations, it is unsurprising that Woolf concludes that “there is much to support the view that it is clothes that wear us and not we them . . . they mould our hearts, our brains, our tongues to their liking” (Woolf, *Orlando* 490). With such laws impeding movement and expression, clothes indeed play a significant role in shaping the occupier to conform to patriarchal values.

Orlando thus discovers how the expected dress of her sex moulds her to the liking of a masculine world order.

So, having now worn skirts for a considerable time, a certain change was visible in Orlando, which was to be found, even in her face. If we compare the picture of Orlando as a man with that of Orlando as a woman we shall see that though both are undoubtedly one and the same person, there are certain changes. The man has his hand free to seize his sword, the woman must use hers to keep the satins from slipping from her shoulders. The man looks the world full in the face, as if it were made for his uses and fashioned to his liking. The woman takes a sidelong glance at it, full of subtlety, even of suspicion. Had they both worn the same clothes, it is possible that their outlook might have been the same. (Woolf 490)

In describing the differences between the pictures of Orlando as a man and a woman, Woolf provides a commentary on the way fashion is designed to perpetuate the freedom men benefit from and the oppression women are constrained by within a patriarchal system. The sword, if taken as a phallic symbol, functions like a slap of a penis to the face; the man can wave his

sword willy-nilly (pun intended) and be rewarded for his tumescence. The satins slipping from the woman's shoulders function to maintain her passivity, to restrain and distract her, to prevent her from acting against the man's privilege. Binaries such as active and passive, strong and weak, masculine and feminine operate to contain and limit options for existence and expression. So long as there is only white and black, right and wrong, left and right, there are no options between and outside, no possibility of destabilising the masculine hegemonic order. However, once the nuances surrounding these binaries start to emerge, infinite possibilities become apparent. Once ideologies shift beyond just man or woman and into a space that defies the ostensible differences between the two, resistance becomes possible. It is in this way, through shifting between genders and clothing and existing in a constant state of flux, that Orlando disrupts the stability of the gender binary and thus destabilises patriarchal order.

Woolf deconstructs imposed binary gender distinctions in many ways. She first argues that the "difference between the sexes is, happily, one of great profundity" (Woolf 490). She argues that, "[d]ifferent though the sexes are, they intermix. In every human being a vacillation from one sex to the other takes place, and often it is only the clothes that keep the male or female likeness, while underneath the sex is the very opposite of what is above" (Woolf 490). If "[c]lothes are but a symbol of something hid deep beneath" (490) it is possible to understand how "[i]t was a change in Orlando herself that dictated her choice of a woman's dress and of a woman's sex" (Woolf 490). According to this logic, it becomes apparent that Orlando's regular change of clothes reflects an ongoing shift in her gender. She is not a congruent woman but has a "mixture in her of man and woman, one being the uppermost and then the other" (490-1). According to Barbara Helt,

[f]inding oneself intermittently thinking 'like a man' and 'like a woman' is not, for Woolf, an identifying feature of a rare type of person. Everyone does it. Effectively

stating that all adults are androgynous, Woolf disrupts both the notion that gender has an essence and the belief that only rare types have the experience of thinking or feeling like both a man and a woman. (Helt 123)

If androgyny is understood to be the combination of feminine and masculine characteristics in a single ambiguous appearance, Woolf subverts the belief that feminine and masculine are mutually exclusive dichotomies and suggests that this vacillation occurs in most people. In addition to disrupting the notion that gender has an essence and that androgyny is rare, Woolf opens space in which to consider gender not as a fixed binary but rather as a fluid phenomenon with multiple possibilities for expression and identification. If so many options are available, it becomes possible to consider the different ways in which one can experience gender.

Orlando both defies and complies with stereotypical characteristics of femininity. She resists the feminine stereotype of vanity by never taking “more than ten minutes to dress” and often having her “clothes chosen rather at random” or “worn rather shabby” (491). She conforms to feminine stereotypes of tender-heartedness by having “none of the formality of a man, or a man’s love of power” and by being unable to “endure to see a donkey beaten or a kitten drowned” (491). She subverts the feminine stereotype of domesticity by detesting “household matters” and being “up at dawn and out among the fields in summer before the sun had risen” (491). She refutes feminine expectations by having a robust knowledge of the crops, being able to “drink with the best,” ride well and drive “six horses at a gallop over London Bridge” (491). She complies with other feminine expectations by experiencing “the most womanly palpitations” at “the sight of another in danger,” bursting “into tears on the slightest provocation,” being “unversed in geography,” finding “mathematics intolerable” and holding “some caprices which are more common among women than men, as for instance that to travel south is to travel downhill” (491). Woolf concludes from this list of

‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ traits that “[w]hether, then, Orlando was most man or woman, it is difficult to say and cannot now be decided” (Woolf 491). Thus, having established Orlando’s gender as feminine, masculine, androgynous and ambiguous, Woolf moves on to reflect this fluidity and multiplicity through Orlando’s dress.

Orlando’s movements between and outside the space of male and female marks the crux of the novel’s complexity. Orlando’s fluctuations of thought about and between one gender and another highlight her own fluid movement between gender identities. Like many gender-bending figures throughout history, Orlando defies patriarchal law and traditional gender expectations by regularly crossing gender, sex and clothing boundaries. Later in the novel, while in pursuit of ‘life’ and ‘a lover,’ “she found it convenient at this time to change frequently from one set of clothes to another” (Woolf 504). However, Orlando’s cross-dressing is not merely for convenience; it reflects a much more complex fluctuation and multiplicity of identity:

[s]he had, it seems, no difficulty in sustaining the different parts, for her sex changed far more frequently than those who have worn only one set of clothing can conceive; nor can there be any doubt that she reaped a twofold harvest by this device; the pleasures of life were increased and its experiences multiplied. For the probity of breeches she exchanged the seductiveness of petticoats and enjoyed the love of both sexes equally. (Woolf 504-5)

It is through the freedom gained by shifting in gender expression that Orlando can experience life and love in full. As Hogan argues,

conformity to one set of gender norms and one set of sex-confined situations will select only some features of one’s self, develop only some capacities, fulfil only some aspirations. (Hogan 201)

Orlando thus embraces a space of sexual fluidity and “unconstrained gender limitations” (Hogan 201). In switching between playing the roles of both man and woman, Orlando liberates herself from the expectation that gender must remain congruent and consistent. Moreover, these shifts offer a space for Orlando to experience gender in a way that does not conform to the masculine-feminine gender binary.

Orlando takes advantage of the many roles available to her through the clothes she wears, opting for the convenience of knee-breeches to “take a turn in the garden and clip the nut trees” (505), changing into “a flowered taffeta which best suited a drive to Richmond and a proposal of marriage from some great nobleman” (505), donning a “snuff-coloured gown like a lawyer’s” to “visit the courts to hear how her cases were doing” (505), and becoming “a nobleman complete from head to toe” to “walk the streets in search of adventure” (505). The most significant clue the reader receives about Orlando’s gender here is her choice of dress when she is at home. Even though the domestic space demands certain roles of women—roles which Orlando predominantly rejects—it also affords distance from the regulatory gaze of society. In fact, perhaps it is due to the way in which she distances herself from society for long periods of time that Orlando comes to embrace and rediscover her fluidity, androgyny and multiplicity. Since literature is one of Orlando’s great loves, it could be understood that, in her books, she is perhaps most herself. Her choice, therefore, to spend “her morning in a China robe of ambiguous gender among her books” (505) reflects a personal preference to situate herself outside of binary gender roles. Away from the expectations that wider society imposes, she grants herself the freedom to express an androgynous gender. Fascinatingly, however, Orlando then receives “a client or two (for she had many scores of suplicants) in the same garment” (505). Although the kinds of clients Orlando receives is somewhat vague—the term ‘suppliant’ implies they are people of a lower class who are asking for her help—it is significant that she opts to remain adorned by

androgynous attire. This decision demonstrates how her clients' opinions cannot possibly influence her mode of dress – perhaps they do not operate as a part of the scrutinising eye of wider society, or their position is not high enough to make a difference. The keeping of androgynous attire reflects a comfort and confidence with an androgynous self, which highlights the multiplicity and fluidity that defines Orlando. Existing simultaneously in past, present and future, as man and woman and something in between, Orlando occupies a space of multiplicity; her history is “a pendulum rather than a progression . . . a multidimensional space” (Newman 113) in which she can embrace multitudinous selves through an ongoing process of becoming.

#### Back in England: Orlando “Grows up”

Upon re-entering England, Orlando discovers a lawsuit is under way to ascertain her status regarding her sex, social position and mortality: “it was in a highly ambiguous condition, uncertain whether she was alive or dead, man or woman, Duke or nonentity, that she posted down to her country seat” (Woolf 481). Stepping away from the liminal space of the *Enamoured Lady* is not enough to project Orlando away from the ambiguity that she experienced on board. Even being dressed and recognised as a lady, she continues to occupy a position of uncertainty and inbetweenness, qualities that remain with her even after the lawsuits are settled and she is pronounced a woman. Despite the legal dilemma about her sex, Orlando never has any trouble being recognised as a woman by other characters in the novel. Indeed, once she returns to her country home,

[n]o one showed an instant's suspicion that Orlando was not the Orlando they had known. If any doubt there was in the human mind the action of the deer and the dogs would have been enough to dispel it, for the dumb creatures, as is well known, are far better judges both of identity and character than we are. (482)

This argument corroborates what the narrator initially states about there being no change in Orlando once assuming the feminine sex. Regardless of anatomy, Orlando is initially considered to be the same person she was before the transition. This argument is a common justification in popular trans\* fictions for encouraging acceptance of a protagonist's transition. Yet, often operating paradoxically with this argument is the idea that the character post-transition is completely different from who they were pre-transition.

In Part One of the thesis, I discuss how some contemporary texts rely on problematic modes of representation and often get caught in a space of contradiction where their central characters will insist at one time that they are the same person and at another time that they are different. This paradox, while problematic in texts such as *The Danish Girl* and *The Secret Life of Luke Livingstone*, also applies to *Orlando*. Here, however the changes that start to occur in Orlando are positioned as a part of her ongoing process of 'growing up.' Part Two critiqued Jake's character development in terms of its trajectory towards a space of completion. By contrast, Woolf's Orlando experiences an ongoing state of becoming. Woolf embraces the view that "[c]hange was incessant, and perhaps would never cease" (Woolf 485). She acknowledges the self not as something fixed or linked to a static gender but rather as something ongoing and all-encompassing: "for all her travels and adventures and profound thinkings and turnings this way and that, she was only in process of fabrication" (Woolf 485). It is thus through this lens of continuity and flux that Woolf positions the changes that take place in Orlando:

[h]er modesty as to her writing, her vanity as to her person, her fears for her safety all seem to hint that what was said a short time ago about there being no change in Orlando the man and Orlando the woman, was ceasing to be altogether true. (490)

Although small changes start to develop in Orlando—ones that might be considered gendered—there are many aspects of herself that remain central to her identity, even though these aspects, too, develop alongside her.

Orlando remarks

how very little she had changed all these years. She had been a gloomy boy, in love with death, as boys are; and then amorous and florid; and then she had been sprightly and satirical; and sometimes she had tried prose and sometimes she had tried drama. Yet through all these changes she had remained, she reflected, fundamentally the same. She had the same brooding meditative temper, the same love of animals and nature, the same passion for the country and the seasons. (Woolf 514)

If Woolf writes to subvert an essential, static, singular self, she achieves it through this balance between sameness and change. Although Orlando occupies a state of constant becoming and frequent flux, there are aspects of Orlando's identity which remain central to her concept of self; yet, these 'constants,' too, are a part of her ongoing transformation, being just as prone to continuous development as her gender is.

One of the most fundamental aspects of Orlando's identity, which remains simultaneously constant and ever-changing, is her poeticism. Orlando is a poet and, when she becomes a woman, she remains a poet throughout the narrative. Indeed, her passion for poetry is so strong that the reader is left with no doubt that poetry will continue to be part of Orlando's life beyond the frame of the novel. Although poetry remains a constant passion of Orlando's, the way in which she approaches the topic morphs throughout the narrative, reflecting an ongoing development of style and sensibility. Poetry, as Orlando initially describes it early in the novel, is a shameful occupation for a man of his rank, since he is expected to spend his time doing other more important things. According to Orlando, poetry (at least in the earlier centuries of the novel's span) is a poor man's occupation. Poetry is

therefore represented more as a class-based activity than a gender-based activity and Orlando chooses to pursue poetry despite its 'unsuitability' for someone so high on England's social ladder. Yet, once he becomes a woman, the reader understands that Orlando's inclination towards sentiment and art grows stronger, which signals how she has internalised societal expectations and stereotypes about femininity. For instance, Orlando allows herself to shed tears more freely, "remembering that it is becoming in a woman to weep" (478). Perhaps it is through her change of sex that Orlando concludes that "[t]he poet's, then, is the highest office of all . . . His words reach where others fall short" (Woolf 484). Most important is how Orlando's writing style develops over the course of her life. This development reflects one of the many ways in which Orlando 'grows up' and highlights one of the novel's central messages about change being ongoing and multiple rather than fixed or moving on a linear axis between two direct points.

Two significant moments occur in the narrative in which Orlando is identified as 'growing up.' Orlando first realises that she is growing up after she has undergone her change of sex and returned home to her country estate. She walks "among the tombs where the bones of her ancestors lay," thinking "I am growing up . . . I am losing my illusions . . . perhaps to acquire new ones" (Woolf 484). Here, the illusion she loses is the grandiosity of her family lineage. She considers the "three or four hundred years" of her ancestry in relation to the much greater lineage of the gypsies and, thinking of "the Egyptian pyramids and what bones lie beneath them" she repeats her initial phrase: "I am growing up . . . I am losing my illusions, perhaps to acquire new ones" (Woolf 484). Acknowledging her shift in perspective, she begins to review "the progress of her own self along her own past" (Woolf 484). She considers how "she had loved sound when she was a boy, and thought the volley of tumultuous syllables from the lips the finest of all poetry" (Woolf 484). She contemplates her study of the poet Browne and her "affair with Greene" (484) and recognises how "she was

only in the process of fabrication” (485) and that “change perhaps would never cease” (485). What illusions might she gain, however? She questions “[w]hat the future might bring” (485) and, finally, “bewildered as usual by the multitude of things which call for explanation and imprint their message without leaving any hint as to their meaning, she threw her cheroot out of the window and went to bed” (485). It is the next morning, “in pursuance of these thoughts” (485) that Orlando starts to work anew on “The Oak Tree” but is interrupted by the Archduke Harry.

The next time Orlando is noted to be growing up is much later in the narrative, during the Victorian era and after Orlando has met Nick Greene again: “it cannot have escaped the reader’s attention that Orlando was growing up – which is not necessarily growing better” (Woolf 536). It is during Orlando’s meeting with Greene that she realises her previous disillusionment with what literature is. Here, her growing up is similarly characterised by a process of losing some illusions and potentially gaining others. Yet, the semblance of a linear trajectory of development is undermined by Orlando’s naivety about the rapidly changing world around her, especially the literary world. Orlando discovers “a shop where they sold books” (537). Having been familiar with manuscripts, quartos and folios her entire life, the “innumerable little volumes . . . surprised her infinitely” (537). Taking the bound and printed status of the many works available in the book store to signal that these were by “very great writers too” (537), Orlando “gave an astounding order to the bookseller to send her everything of importance in the shop” (537).

Orlando’s ignorance about ‘important’ writing as well as the changes happening in the world around her project her development backwards somewhat, towards a self that is still in the process of learning and becoming. Even though she is said to be ‘growing up’ here, she also appears childlike in her lack of awareness about her surroundings. If growing up is not necessarily growing better then growing up is also not necessarily growing wiser or more

knowledgeable, a literary expectation which is often reflected in coming-of-age narratives. Woolf therefore resists conventional models of character development by dismantling the idea of growth as linear and upwards/forward. Instead, development in *Orlando* is lateral and multiple, fragmented and ambivalent, overlapping and contradictory. It is in this way that Woolf challenges singular, fixed and binary modes of understanding gender, the self and identity.

#### “The Present Moment”

Virginia Woolf's *Orlando: A Biography* concludes in “the present moment” on the eleventh of October 1928 (Woolf 543). The fact that the novel concludes at the time of its publication, after following Orlando through 500 years of growth and change, highlights how the continuous nature of change is inevitable. By the early twentieth century, it was starting to become more commonplace for women to wear pants. If clothes indeed change our world view as well as the world's view of us, Orlando must have a long period beyond the scope of the novel in which to be influenced by changing fashions and improving equality for women. The ability to wear pants as a woman, to drive a car and to vote as a woman are all empowering activities that have the potential to influence Orlando's thinking about her identity, especially in terms of fluidity and liminality. Perhaps by the end of the twentieth century, if Orlando can do anything a man can do and can wear anything a man can, perhaps she might be freer to use some of the contemporary terms we now have at our disposal to define herself. Perhaps her androgynous, shifting and all-encompassing identity might better be described as genderfluid, genderqueer or nonbinary? Maybe her identity is so complex that it defies definition.

It is both surprising and unsurprising that Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* is the most complex and subversive text examined in this thesis. It is surprising because, if one assumes

that, with time and forward momentum, societal values might shift to accommodate for difference and diversity, the underlying implication is that every contemporary text analysed herein must have something unique to say to advance conversation about the complexity of queer gender and challenge the dominant ideologies, problematic stereotypes and binary belief systems that permeate societal preoccupations with gender. At best, these contemporary texts repeat what others have already identified before, producing yet another imitation of an imitation that perpetuates the sameness found in patriarchal literary tradition. Yet, it is also unsurprising that none of these contemporary texts can advance the gender conversation any further than Woolf precisely because of how unique and subversive her work is. Woolf indeed belongs to the spirit of her own age—the Modernist age—insofar that she challenges, disrupts, deconstructs and dismantles problematic beliefs about the self as congruent, consistent, static and singular. Woolf creates a new language, a new literary structure in which she can contemplate the multiplicity, fluidity and androgyny of human existence. In freeing herself, her text and her central character from essentialist values and binary thought, Woolf projects identity into a realm beyond the regulatory forces of patriarchal order. She demonstrates that, when one frees oneself from these hegemonic ideologies, one is afforded with the liberation to explore different modes of existence, identification and expression. Doing so thus creates exponential potential to pursue the multitudinous possibilities that life and love have to offer.

## Conclusion

This thesis has been driven by an impetus to explore and understand different ways of experiencing queer gender. With its specific interest in dismantling binaries, resisting notions of congruence, conformity and fixity, and challenging the status quo, it has sought to provide insight to the ideological functions of fictional texts that represent genders in transition.

Identifying significant repetitions of conformity and trans\* pathologisation in the construction of contemporary popular fiction narratives, this thesis has asked “what is failing in popular fiction representations of trans\* experience?”, “how is it failing?” and “why is it failing?” Having juxtaposed popular fiction narratives of the twenty-first century with Armistead Maupin’s series *Tales of the City* and the twentieth-century literary fiction of Angela Carter and Virginia Woolf, this thesis reveals a pattern of increasing conservatism over time, particularly in popular genre fiction narratives.

This trend of increasing conservatism over time can be attributed not only to the constraints of genre but also to issues of political correctness, audience and publisher expectations, and sociocultural circumstances, which result in many authors choosing to approach the topic of queer gender in a safe and serious way. Social values have shifted dramatically in Western cultures over the last century. Understandings of difference, whether it be related to gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class, socioeconomic status, ability or otherwise, have moved from places of ignorance to spaces that aim for tolerance, inclusion and equality. It is with a knowledge of and need to protect the progress that has been made, alongside a hope to influence the change which is yet to come, that authors approach the issue of transgender representation. Understanding that the institutional, legal and social marginalisation of people with queer gender identities persists into the twenty-first century places authors wanting to write sympathetically about experiences of transition in a difficult position. Contemporary authors are writing at a time where the face-value understanding of

political correctness reigns – they want to avoid being seen as unfair, offensive or antagonistic. Yet, ironically, this well-meaning position is what closes down possibility and instead shapes works that marginalise, stigmatise, stereotype and pathologise queer genders.

At present, the contemporary popular fiction book market is drowning in safe, white, middleclass texts that reinforce problematic messages about what it means to be trans\*. The YA fiction novels, *Luna* by Julie Anne Peters, *Parrotfish* by Ellen Wittlinger, *Symptoms of Being Human* by Jeff Garvin and *If I Was Your Girl* by Meredith Russo, are all coming-of-age narratives that situate the trans\* character as needing to meet dominant gender expectations in order to be accepted by society and allowed to take their first steps into adulthood. The other fictional texts engaged with in Part One, including *The Danish Girl* (2000), Charity Norman's *The Secret Life of Luke Livingstone* (2015) and Laurie Frankel's *This Is How It Always Is* (2017), reinforce similar messages about conforming to binary, congruent and consistent gender ideals.

Cumulatively, these repetitive, one-dimensional representations imply that having a nonconforming gender identity means being a victim, struggling with a double identity, having mental health issues, experiencing limited to no desire, and often feeling fearful, isolated and out of place. Analysis of these texts reveals a shared authorial agenda concerning the provision of safe, accessible and comforting narratives. Ideologically speaking, they tend to reinforce dominant gender stereotypes, perpetuate the heteronormative status quo and comply with simplistic modes of narrating trans\* identity. This impetus to play it safe demonstrates an anxiety about disturbing the known, that which is consoling and easy to understand. These are texts that are not interested in disturbing convention or tradition and, although they impress positive messages about acceptance and sympathy, they function to reinforce hegemonic understandings of gender. Comparing these texts with others that operate differently in terms of their subversive qualities emphasises the failure of popular

fiction representations of trans\* identities and reveals alternative possibilities for opening conversations about the complexities of nonconforming gender.

Armistead Maupin's series *Tales of the City* reflects a different pattern. Although subversive in many ways and encountering trans\* gender and queer desire in a playful way that opens conversation about the fluid and multiple nature of human existence and identification, these texts also rely on some pathologising tropes that reinforce the individual with queer gender as someone who is harassed, out of place and needing to live up to societal expectations of fixed, conformative, congruent gender. *Tales of the City* celebrates queer desire and the transgender and moves away from the trope of the trans\* individual being caught between two identities, instead highlighting the possibility of embracing duality. Yet, *Tales of the City* also fails to challenge binaries and situates human growth as fixed, leading to a space of completion and finality.

Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* and Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve* are works of literary art. Their mastery of language through the deconstruction and redefining of literary tradition are a testament to the power of the written word when it seeks not to conform to but to disturb convention. Through an explicit rejection of hegemonic narrative structures, Woolf and Carter destabilise patriarchal tradition, expose the malleability of both narrative and gender, and reveal the potential that comes from rejecting the status quo. These are texts that demonstrate originality, complexity and subversiveness. They challenge social expectations of gender, undermine the pathological tropes commonly relied on in contemporary popular fiction and raise important questions about the multiplicity and mutability of human experience and identification. They project gender into a realm beyond the binary, demonstrating that it possible to experience gender in a way that embraces not only the masculine and feminine but also the androgynous, the in-between and that which exists outside pre-existing notions of dichotomous gender. These are texts that encounter gender

transition in significantly different ways not only from the texts analysed in Parts One and Two but also from each other.

Carter's novel presents a dystopian world in which the central character encounters transition in a shockingly violent and traumatic way. The positioning of Eve/lyn's sex change as enforced rather than elective opens avenues to explore the construction and performance of gender from different angles. It is only through his/her process of internalising femininity—making the mind match the body rather than the body match the mind—that Eve/lyn can reach understandings of multiplicity and mutability, in which space is afforded to consider the debates Carter raises about the sociocultural factors that influence gender. Woolf's novel, by contrast, is a world defined by fluidity, multiplicity and unceasing growth. Orlando's transition is unique insofar that his/her change of sex occurs spontaneously overnight and without any pain or violence. In this sense, Orlando's change is figured as both fantastical and natural. His/her process of gender acquisition that follows is one that carefully contemplates the socially imposed structures that oppress women, regulate difference and stipulate strict rules for binary ways of being. Orlando's resistance to these structures demonstrates that the self is an organic, ever-evolving entity that simultaneously shapes and is shaped by the body, one's social environment and one's preconceptions.

Gender is a complex and multi-faceted phenomenon, just like every other form of identity, and requires more nuanced representation in popular fiction. In order to explore the complex ways in which it is possible to exist and have identity, representations of trans\* genders have great potential to communicate new messages about selfhood when they seek to reflect the complex intersections of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, disability and class. Future studies could consider the possibilities that can emerge from narratives that explore the intersections of minority groups. In particular, close attention could be paid to fictional representations of trans\* experience by trans\* authors. It is necessary to put the voices of

trans\* authors in the spotlight and to pay close attention to what they have to say. It is essential to raise the voices of queer writers who might also have a disability, experience poverty or low socio-economic class, come from ethnic or indigenous backgrounds, and live in countries that do not possess much visibility in world popular culture. The voices belonging to people who have experienced multiple forms of systemic oppression are the ones that need to be heard the most. These are the voices that can demonstrate diversity is to be celebrated, express new and different understandings of human experience, and challenge the structures in society that have led to their marginalisation.

It is time so speak up. It is time to scrutinise the diversity in the world and show it off. It is time to understand that the possibilities for human existence can be limitless. The potential for personal growth and identification is exponential. No person need be any singular thing alone. No person need choose between one option or another. Rather, if one can embrace both, all of the above, neither, the in-between and beyond, one's world will open. As a reader, I expect the written word to open my world, to expand the horizons of my mind, to challenge what I think I know and how I perceive the world around me. It is time for the contemporary popular fiction book market to meet these expectations. Publishers have a duty to disseminate words that open people's worlds, rather than closing them down. Writers have a duty to disrupt the stipulated conventions and expectations of literary form; for, how is one to challenge the oppressive structures that regulate society if one insists on conforming to them? How is it possible to reach new understandings of difference and potential if one insists on following the rules, repeating existing patterns and remaining in the realm of the known?

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## Appendix 1 – Table of Third Person Singular Pronouns

	Subject Pronoun	Object Pronoun	Possessive Determiner	Possessive Pronoun	Reflexive Pronoun
She	<i>She</i> is queer	I like <i>her</i>	<i>Her</i> name is	That is <i>hers</i>	She'll do it <i>herself</i>
e	<i>e</i> is queer	I like <i>er</i>	<i>er</i> name is	That is <i>ers</i>	e'll do it <i>erself</i>
e	<i>e</i> is queer	I like <i>em</i>	<i>es</i> name is	That is <i>es</i>	e'll do it <i>emself</i>
e	<i>e</i> is queer	I like <i>em</i>	<i>eir</i> name is	That is <i>eirs</i>	ey'll do it <i>eirself</i>
hu	<i>hu</i> is queer	I like <i>hum</i>	<i>hus</i> name is	That is <i>hus</i>	hu'll do it <i>humself</i>
sie, hir	<i>sie</i> is queer	I like <i>hir</i>	<i>hir</i> name is	That is <i>hirs</i>	sie'll do it <i>hirsself</i>
sie, sir	<i>sie</i> is queer	I like <i>sem</i>	<i>sir</i> name is	That is <i>sirs</i>	sie'll do it <i>semself</i>
ti	<i>ti</i> is queer	I like <i>tem</i>	<i>tir</i> name is	That is <i>tirs</i>	ti'll do it <i>tirself</i>
ve	<i>ve</i> is queer	I like <i>ver</i>	<i>vis</i> name is	That is <i>vis</i>	ve'll do it <i>verself</i>
ve	<i>ve</i> is queer	I like <i>vem</i>	<i>vir</i> name is	That is <i>virs</i>	ve'll do it <i>vemself</i>
xe, xyr	<i>xe</i> is queer	I like <i>xem</i>	<i>xyr</i> name is	That is <i>xyrs</i>	xe'll do it <i>xemself</i>
xie, xir	<i>xie</i> is queer	I like <i>xem</i>	<i>xir</i> name is	That is <i>xirs</i>	xie'll do it <i>xirself</i>
ze, hir	<i>ze</i> is queer	I like <i>hir</i>	<i>hir</i> name is	That is <i>hirs</i>	ze'll do it <i>hirsself</i>
<i>Ze/zie,</i> <i>zir</i>	<i>ze/zie</i> is queer	I like <i>zem/zir</i>	<i>zir/zes</i> name is	That is <i>zirs/zes</i>	ze'll do it <i>zemself/zirself</i>
<i>zhe</i>	<i>zhe</i> is queer	I like <i>zhim</i>	<i>zher</i> name is	That is <i>zhers</i>	<i>zhe</i> 'll do it <i>zhimself</i>