TITLE PAGE

A Presence Past and Future: Emerging Trans* Literary Criticism

by

Julian A. Quesenberry

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Thesis Advisor: Dr. Michele Ren

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Michele Ren — 3/17/25

Dr. Michele Ren
Thesis Advisor — Date

David Beach — 3/17/25

Dr. David Beach
Committee Member — Date

Jamie L. McDaniel — 3/17/25

Dr. Jamie McDaniel
Committee Member — Date

ABSTRACT

A recent increase in published transgender works in the United States has revealed advancements in queer representation in literature. Trans authors and storytellers have always existed, but little work has been done to trace a formal trans literary history. Researchers have highlighted the transgender memoir as the origin of transgender literature and have ignored older examples of trans authorship. This thesis investigates the many origins of trans literature and traces their evolutions across time and culture. Chapter one outlines historical conceptualizations of trans* identity and storytelling, chapter two explores a post-medical form of trans* literature, and chapter three applies trans* concepts and theory to the trans* speculative fiction genre. Research for this project was conducted using a combination of primary and secondary literary sources. A trans* lens is used to make visible a trans* literary history, which includes performative and trans-coded works as well as overtly trans narratives. I explore Stephanie Clare's definition of trans* literature and modify it to craft a framework for trans* literary criticism in the twenty-first century. This research and its fruits reveal connections between trans* literature and cultural perspectives regarding transgender identity. As the understanding of trans* identity, art, culture, and politics continues to evolve, so will trans* literature.

Julian A. Quesenberry, M.A.
Department of English, 2025
Radford University

DEDICATION

To the trans* elders who have gone before, to Dr. James Barry, Lou Sullivan, and Marsha P. Johnson, and especially to those who were denied language for self-description or forcibly categorized by unforgivingly binary archival systems, to those whose stories are now lost to time immemorial. Thank you for choosing to live, love, and fight to carve out a place in this world. We thank you. We honor you.

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Introduction: Identifying Frameworks and Definitions

Historical and Contemporary Frameworks

In her introductory chapter to *The Routledge Handbook of Trans Literature,* Sabine Sharp reflects on the words of Cheryl Morgan, a science fiction publisher and critic, who in 2010 regarded the emergence of "a body of work labeled 'trans literature'" as "highly unlikely given the size of the trans population" (2). Joy Ladin echoes this sentiment a year later in 2011. Sabine Sharp quotes Ladin as saying, "there are too few trans-identified authors publishing too few books, and too few readers, students and scholars interested in reading, studying, and teaching [trans works] … 'Trans Literature' isn't likely to be a viable category any time soon" (2). These reflections, made roughly fifteen years ago, emphasize the rapid change which has taken place at a societal level regarding transgender individuals and their creative bodies of work.

As early as 1997, transgender writer and activist Patrick Califia called for a new understanding of transgender culture and literature, a scholarship which incorporates the historiographic, the autobiographical, and the transgressively ambitious works of authors such as Kate Bornstein and Leslie Feinberg. However, this perspective and approach were not incorporated into mainstream literary thought until the 2020's. Even now, the current understanding of a transgender literary tradition incorporates archival texts, books written by cisgender or unidentified authors with transgressive themes regarding gender and works traditionally deemed nonliterary such as fanfiction and memoirs. These works exist within an ever-evolving cultural context. Much like the Transgender Umbrella Theory used in relating trans* identities to one another, a transgender literary tradition cannot be immediately categorized with a single narrow definition. Each work, though a part of the larger body, cannot be understood in terms of pieces or distinct and exclusive sections. A hierarchical or

chronological approach cannot account for the interplay between texts, their authors, and the current categories used to classify existing trans* texts. A new type of criticism which utilizes elements of queer theory, gender theory, cultural criticism, and rhizome is necessary to understand the complex interplay between the trans* history, culture, politics, and literature.

Drawing upon the framework established by Bonnie Zimmerman's "What Has Never Been: An Overview of Lesbian Feminist Literary Criticism," I assert that trans* works already exist both within the literary canon and outside of traditional literary forms. Zimmerman explains: "Beginning with nothing, as we thought, this generation quickly began to expand the limitations of literary scholarship by pointing to what had been for decades 'unspeakable' – lesbian existence– 'what has never been'" (451). The unspeakable nature of lesbian identity caused much work to remain hidden or unlabeled. The "otherness" which lesbians experience in society significantly impacted the perception of lesbian stories (451). This paired with what Zimmerman regards as "heterosexist assumptions" caused many works to remain unidentified by historians and other academics (453). Scholars tend to assume cisgender-ness or heterosexuality due to the precedent academia has set which leaves queer authors and characters without any particular labels. While it is important not to import modern terms to historic figures, ignoring gender norm transgression altogether simply erases trans* stories from literary history.

Zimmerman's work helped define lesbian literature and construct a more inclusive literary genre which continues to expand. She offered a working definition for queer presence in historical context which regards lesbians as "woman-identified-women" (455). Alongside this definition, she raises the question of how to accurately define a lesbian writer. Just as transgender studies scholars currently experience the problem of definition, lesbian literature scholars have long argued over terminology. There is a clear tension between the term lesbian

and the idea of a "female-centered identity" (456). In trans* studies this concept can be found in the tension between the modern medical term transgender and the broader umbrella of trans* identity which includes a variety of gender transgressive behaviors. In order to differentiate between works such as Dorthey Richardson's *Pilgrimage* that "despite one lesbian relationship, [are] primarily heterosexual" Zimmerman offers a trio of criteria (465). This trio of being written about/by/for (or as Zimmerman puts it, with "lesbian vision" in mind) decenters works which are about lesbians but not by or for them (459). Emerging trans* literary scholarship has presented this model as well.

Zimmerman also identifies the natural conflict of lesbian literature with the traditional literary canon. She anticipates a scholarship that would "violate norms of traditional criticism" (460). She explains that this is the case because lesbians are already viewed as taboo because they are "what is unspeakable about women" (463). The lesbian is the celebration of monstrosity just as the trans* person is. Both challenge a society that fears the values they embody. Zimmerman furthers this argument by encouraging scholars to embrace "lesbian themes and issues regardless of ideological purity" (466). The concept of ideological purity has long been the source of division in the understanding of trans* literature as individuals have grappled with the inclusion of cisgender-authored texts which do not fully capture the nuance of trans* experience or perpetrate the stereotypes of transgender brokenness and monstrosity. In recent years, trans* works have become more mainstream in both literature and popular culture. This surge in identifiable works has made visible the ongoing friction that exists between visibility and identity. In a broader sense, the current evolutions and regressions of social and political policy exist in tension with many facets of trans* representation and thus directly inform trans* works.

In “Towards a Black Feminist Criticism,” Barbara Smith, another literary scholar who sought to better define a literary genre, explores the need for a distinctly Black feminist literary criticism. She notes “a viable, autonomous Black feminist movement in this country would open up the space needed for the exploration of Black women's lives and the creation of consciously Black woman-identified art” (20). The way Smith approaches this proposal is thoughtful, and many of her predictions have since become reality in the literary world. Her scholarship applies directly to intersectional transgender literary criticism. Smith connects “the politics of Black women’s lives” to “what [they] write about and [their] situation as artists;” similarly, a transgender literary critique must consider the social and political reality of transgender individuals in the United States and abroad (20). Smith notes the “non existence” of Black lesbian writing” and what that means in regard to the broader state of Black women’s culture and “the intensity of all Black women’s oppression” (20). This too can be directly applied to the transgender population.

Transgender individuals of color, especially Black trans-women, are nearly completely excluded from representation in the literary canon. For many years transgender people–particularly transgender women–were viewed with morbid curiosity or outright contempt. The only acceptable form of storytelling was that of the sexually sanitized transgender woman who upheld hetero-patriarchy by medically transitioning thus disappearing the social problem of transness. Smith also notes: “The Black feminist critic would be constantly aware of the political implications of her work and would assert the connections between it and the political situation of all Black women” (23). Similarly, transgender critics would need to have an awareness of and connectedness to the political situation of all transgender people. Smith addresses the nature of coded work by referencing the Modern Language Association convention in 1976 when Bertha

Harris connected strong images of deviant women to lesbian literature. This perspective encouraged literary scholars to identify works that were not explicitly lesbian by using broader social conventions to reinforce their lesbian-coded nature. For transgender literature, the coded literature can often look like themes of self-identification and gender norm transgression.

Identifying and Using Terms

*The Use of Trans**

In her book *Transgender History,* Susan Stryker dates the origin of the modern conceptualization of transness to the mid 19th century. She links this movement directly with the advances in medical science that meant surgery was no longer a death sentence. She acknowledges the way modern transness has been forcibly tied to the medical field and the way white western ideas regarding gender have influenced the very definition of transgender identity. In spite of this, Stryker choses to adapt the word trans to fit a broader definition. She notes that the concept of transgender she wishes to study focuses on "the movement across a socially imposed boundary away from an unchosen starting place— rather than any particular destination or mode of transition" (1). With this focus, Stryker can locate transness for the purpose of historic conversation in the gender transgressive behaviors and "use [the term] 'transgender' to refer to the widest imaginable range of gender-variant practices and identities" (19). When defining gender itself, Stryker regards it as "the social organization of different kinds of bodies into different categories of people;" she also notes that "historically and cross-culturally, there have been many different systems of organizing people into genders" (11). She argues that because gender varies across cultures there can be no fixed criteria for transness.

My own use of trans* is informed by this perspective as well as the current understanding and use of the terms trans, transexual, and transgender. I do not use transexual or transgender

when speaking of a broader literary history because these terms have a specific meaning rooted in twentieth and twenty-first century social norms and gender concepts. I choose to add the asterisk (*) to the term trans to highlight the fluidity and flexibility expressed in Stryker's own conceptualization of the term. The use of the asterisk symbolizes the many gender transgressive identities throughout history and now that do not fit into a western understanding of transgender identity. This includes intersex identities, socially constructed and non-medical trans identities, and gender transgressive but unlabeled identities.

Trans Literature and Lens*

A definable trans* literature and the use of a trans* lens are both crucial to the understanding of trans* work across time and culture. In "Culture and Trans Literature," Nicole Anae draws connections between the conceptualizations of culture and transness and the impact these two concepts have on literary scholarship. Anae regards culture as an organization of people, things, and culture. Alongside Sabine Sharp, Anae regards an essential definition of transness as unknowable because of the incredible variation within the trans community. Anae states, "Communicating through literature the multiplicity of ways to be trans appears in the rich diversity of trans writers writing across various genres… crossing and blurring artistic boundaries to create new forms that speak specifically to their content" (20). The variation found in these works speaks to a style of writing which reflects the flexibility of the author.

When considering what makes literature trans* literature, Anae argues that one key function is to promote transnormativity. In challenging the notion equating cisgender identity to normalcy, the mere representation of 'normal' transgender individuals in popular culture and literature is revolutionary. Anae argues that even less-than-ideal representation can be utilized: "docu-soaps make a spectacle of trans-femininity and the trans experience as a whole but also

serve to normalize the existence of transgender identity and make them ‘knowable’ culturally” (22). An understanding which places cisgender identity as the default is directly tied to broader eurocentric culture. Anae argues that scholars must consider the culture of origin when analyzing the work as “each work which focuses on a specific culture will use that culture's lens rather than eurocentrism thus having a varied framework for beliefs not necessarily aligning to the angelo conceptualization of trans” (22). The emphasis of the connection between culture and gender conceptualization help frame how a variety of works can be regarded as trans*.

When analyzing “trans-authored literature that goes beyond simple representation to seriously contemplate trans issues” we locate the source of trans* literature itself (Anae 24). Anae argues that Stephanie Clare’s definition of trans literature (2022, 119) as “literature written by trans-identified writers, literature that explores the relations between transness and aesthetics while explicitly attempting to reach audiences that are trans or transliterate” provides a general perspective; it is not a perfect definition (24). Clare’s explanation provides a broad view of what trans literature conceivably is and does, but it is not the only way to conceptualize or define trans literature. Ladin advocated for a type of trans literature that “embraced multiple literary dialects, styles, aesthetics, or modes of meaning-making beyond simply ‘stories,’ but narrative accounts written to include the idiosyncratic stylistic elements and literary qualities reflecting the cultural significance of transgender experience” (24). Works that encounter themes of transness in a unique way often lend themselves to the use of a trans* lens even if they are not ultimately identified as trans* literature.

The use of a trans* lens is particularly useful in works that use performative gender acts and trans-coding. In “Performativity and Trans Literature,” Alexa Alice Joubin explores Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* and Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and their uses of trans-coded body swapping.

Performativity as a concept aligns with many of the gender theory concepts discussed by Judith Butler in works such as *Undoing Gender*. Butler argues that "the terms that make up one's own gender are, from the start, outside oneself, beyond oneself in a sociality that has no single author" (1). External social structures can in this way help the individual construct gender and restrict the ways in which this constructed gender is embodied.

Building on this concept of performativity, Joubin further argues the role of both speech and action in the construction of gender. Alexa Alice Joubin's theory of performativity is twofold: first, "that gender as social practices—mannerism, comportment, sartorial choices, grooming habits, uses of voice—evolve over time and in different social spaces;" meaning that there is no immutable standard for man-ness or woman-ness and secondly that "these practices are constituted, and sometimes undermined, by performative speech acts, by words that delineate ever-moving interpersonal relationships and social boundaries" (31). The second portion of Joubin's theory offers a model where language can both reinforce and destabilize gender presentation socially. Furthermore, Joubin argues, "gender is produced by trans performativity in temporally bound ways, revealing why our vocabularies of gender evolve over generations" and that humanity's conceptualization of gender is best understood as a collection of "communal experiences" (31). The flexibility of this theory of performativity conflicts with the traditional understanding of literature because "scholarship… tends to regard gender practices as fixed, reflecting the fixity of printed text" (Joubin 32). Performance studies threaten the stability of these "unexamined assumptions" and call scholars to question the belief that "text alone encompasses everything words connote" (Joubin 32). In fact, Joubin argues, "performative rhetoric and the performativity of narratives are as important as the narrative text in co-producing literary meanings. A text-centric attitude obscures the embodied experience of gender" (32). This

approach allows scholars to analyze "trans-adjacent literary productions that depict tacit transness" without including "explicitly" trans characters (Joubin 32). The identifiers 'cis' and 'trans' are meaningless without one another; scholars "do not always know, and do not need to know, transness, and transness is not always recognizable in the same way to everyone in every culture or every time period" (Joubin 32). The relationship between terms constitutes their being, thus cultures with very rigid and binary gender norms may have more identifiers of trans-ness than cultures with fluid or flexible understanding of gender norms and expression.

Joubin further argues that "one may narrate oneself into existence, and writers may narrativize and give meanings to others' lives" (32). This highlights the important role of language in representation. Michel de Montaigne's 1580 travel journal exemplifies this as Montaigne "uses verbs such as 'passing' and affirming personal pronouns in the majority of his narrative of the life of Germain, likely an intersex individual" (Joubin 32). The information gained by documents such as these makes visible forms of gender expression which were not necessarily sanctioned or advertised in formal literature of the period.

Joubin argues, "as important as it is to celebrate trans self-representation, there are key benefits to expanding the scope of trans literature beyond explicitly trans narratives through the notion of performativity" (33). In order to undertake this expansion of scope, scholars must analyze works which were "previously (mis)labeled as non-trans" and consider narratives "that may or may not align with their self-identification" (Joubin 33). The use of the trans* lens allows literary scholars the flexibility needed for such work that cannot definitively be labelled as transgender but does fall under the category of trans*.

Using a trans* lens, I will work to make visible a trans* literary history which includes performative and trans-coded works as well as overtly trans narratives. I will also explore further

Stephanie Clare's definition of trans* literature and establish a framework for trans* literary criticism in the twenty-first century.

Chapter One: Historical Connections and Rhetorical Applications

Seeking a Starting Point

For many years when locating an origin for trans* literature, scholars located the genesis with the transgender memoir. The memoir, born out of a need for understanding and a cultural pressure to assimilate transgender individuals, fit seamlessly into the broader context of a medical model of transgender identity. Rather than regarding the medical model of transgender identity as the single point from which trans* literature burst outward, the model I propose identifies the medical model as a pathologizing and bridling force which assimilated a number of diverse experiences into a single, and more importantly, diagnosable, one. This narrowing and clarifying process, albeit important, is a shift in the nature of trans* literature, not a genesis. The literary genesis of trans* literature is unlocatable because it is convergent rather than divergent in nature. Storytelling traditions across culture, both oral and written, constitute a rich tapestry of gender expressive and transgressive narratives. Thus, upon closer inspection, a mapped body of trans* work begins to actually resemble an hourglass in which, over a period of hundreds of years, a plethora of narratives are boiled away by a medical model of transgender identity then over the course of decades, slowly reclaimed and remixed with the emphasis shifted from the transgressive nature of the narrative to the explicit identity of an author in conjunction with this transgressive nature.

Unearthing Historical Identities

In approaching a trans* literary history (the first half of this hourglass figure), one must consider the broader cultural and political context of a trans* history. This means navigating the application of modern terms in a context from which they are naturally divorced. In her article "A Presence in the Past: A Transgender Historiography," Genny Beemyn notes "any attempt to

write ‘transgender history’ is complicated by the contemporary nature of the term ‘transgender’ and its cultural specificity” (113). Because of the limited nature of this word, Beemyn advises acknowledging individuals whose actions indicate gender transgression without labeling them using twenty-first century terminology. Beemyn admits, “motivations are not always clearly discernible” however it is imperative to distinguish between individuals who had other reasons for presenting as a different gender besides “a sense of gender difference” (113). This becomes challenging work when a culture exhibits strong anti-women sentiments. In cultures such as these, women may present as men in order to obtain certain freedoms and privileges rather than because they desire to actually be men. Katarzyna Burzyńska suggests in “Renaissance Literature as Trans Literature” the purpose of “not necessarily to ‘recover’ trans characters… or to definitively ‘prove’ temporal presence” but rather to interact with them across time (472). By approaching trans* literary scholarship with this purpose in mind, one may release the burden of ‘proving’ authors or characters to be transgender in the twenty-first century sense of the word and shift focus towards a constructive and respectful means of identification and acknowledgement.

A significant challenge is located in scholars’ approach to identification itself. “Enlightenment Literature as Trans Literature” by Kelly Swartz asks the question: “How can we prevent [identity] erasure while refusing to take archival absences as evidence of the non-existence of gender and sexual nonconformity in the past?” (482). While ascribing a modern identity is fraught, as noted by Ginny Beemyn, ascribing no signifier at all can be equally damaging. In “Performativity and Trans Literature,” Alexa A. Joubin argues that “lives under different labels do not invalidate or negate those trans-adjacent experiences” and challenges scholars to consider the identities “now rendered illegible” due to a sort of cisheteronormative

confirmation bias (Joubin 35). As mentioned prior, vocabulary changes over time, thus scholars cannot accurately ascribe transness or cisness to historic figures using the *exact* meanings used contemporarily, but by exploring diverse identities. Ascribing a default cisgender identity or status to a historic work is not tenable as it limits the number of new meanings which can be explored (Gazzoli). Furthermore, Joubin argues, "it is ahistorical to not use intersectional, or open-ended, modes of inquiry to examine historical works" (35). Often the representation of what modern scholars identify as 'transgender' is only revealed due to open gender transgression. 'Passing' individuals are not of note until they are 'found-out' after death. In "Medieval Literature as Trans Literature," Laura Gazzoli explains: "Our gaze is only drawn to such people when they became conspicuous to others because of their gender variance" (463). Thus, many trans* individuals are written out of history or starkly under or misrepresented. Then raises the question of how to practically apply this theoretical method of inquiry.

In "Archival Speculation and Trans Fiction," Travis L. Wagner emphasizes the need for practical use of open-ended inquiry in archival and literary research. He proposes a "both/and" model for research which rejects the modern need for a single identity marker for transgender identification (75). He states that "naming an identity can help concretize its place in the record, but doing so also defines what cannot exist under otherwise broad categorical boundaries" (78). For the history of trans* literature specifically, this could mean opening up to the possibility of trans* authors with multiple identities or no specific identity beyond a broad definition of gender transgression. It could also mean adopting the vocabulary of the period or culture. In "Nondualist Philosophies and Trans Literature," Peter I-min Huang notes that Sinitic studies scholars "question using Western terminology to theorize Eastern transgender identities, issues, histories, concerns, and so forth" (Huang 86). These scholars prefer to use terms indigenous to the region

and culture such as ‘androgynous’ when discussing gender nonconforming individuals and works (Huang 86). Utilizing broad definitions of gender transgression and vocabulary native to the region or period is integral to the work of following the threads of trans* stories across time and culture.

When considering this broad type of categorization, Sabine Sharp, author of the introductory chapter of the *Routledge Handbook of Trans Literature*, focuses on the interpretation of trans* themes rather than the identification of historic trans* authors. Because of the ever-shifting nature of our vocabularies and social construction of gender identity, the future concepts of self and societal identification of gender are “fundamentally unknowable” thus narrowing the category of Trans Literature to works and authors that reflect our current cultural understanding of transness is ineffective (4). Sharp further argues, “when trying to locate trans literature as comprised only by authors known publicly to be trans, we risk assuming that there is a proper way to be identifiable as such: excluded are those who are ‘not yet out’ as trans, whose gender variance is illegible to the dominant Western framework, who lived before the availability of ‘trans’ as a category for self-description, or whose sense of gendered self remains opaque” (4). Sharp notes that one method of “expanding [the] conception of ‘trans literature’” can be achieved by “offering generative re-readings of long-disregarded works and imaginative approaches to interpreting archival traces of nonnormative sex and gender” (4). This method allows scholars to ascribe trans-ness to historic gender transgressive literature while putting it in conversation with more modern trans works. Utilizing this method, scholars must maintain a sense of flexibility when categorizing works. Sharp explains, “Trans literature is ever mutating, ever producing the unexpected and previously unthinkable—this present volume seeks to track some of those mutations and inversions, presenting a shifting and unfinished map of where trans

literature has gone and might go" (4). Thus, by exploring works previously overlooked or excluded, scholars can expand the body of work which can be categorized as trans literature through what can be understood as the use of a trans* literary lens. Sharp also notes, "adopting a strategic approach to trans literature, with a flexible and unfixed definition, allows for inventive and catalytic readings of works, expanding the scope of scholarship on trans literature and opening up future avenues of inquiry" (4). This "unfixed definition" quite similar to Wagner's "both/and" definition allows scholars to critique the work as separate from the author's identity.

However, any compilation of trans* texts prior to the introduction of the medical model of trans* identity will ultimately be non-exhaustive. Many trans* texts have yet to be rediscovered as characteristics such as race, sex assigned at birth, class, and nationality of the author have historically impacted the preservation and perceived value of literary works. Additionally, Lenka Filipova notes in "Temporality and Trans Literature" that non-literary trans* texts are often disappeared by traditional fixed methods of archival categorization. Efforts to combat this rigidity are necessary because without an alteration in design these systems "provide very little room for identities in flux" and exhibit an inherent "hostility towards a destabilization of cisnormativity" (Wagner 73). To be cataloged upon death as one's sex assigned at birth without regard for the inhabited and performed gender during life, is a fate many gender ambiguous figures find themselves resigned to. It is for this reason, that the aforementioned methods of and strategies for categorization, while not perfect, are crucial for the development of a tangible trans* literary history.

Tracing Entry Points of Trans* Literary History

Because the trans* literary history has many entry points, I have chosen to trace several possible paths through pre-medical model trans* literature. Each of these paths utilizes a trans

lens to consider the way in which trans* works have become intertwined with a concept. Regarding the trans* population's relationship to normalcy, Patrick Califia states in his work *Sex Changes*:

> To be differently-gendered was to be a freak and a moral monstrosity, certainly, but it was also associated with the mysticism and heroism of Joan of Arc, the romance of the double agent d'Eon, the flamboyance of the abbé d'Choissy. Thus, the general public did not have to worry about their spouses or children or close friends being transgendered—this was not something that ordinary people experienced, it was of another realm, whether that realm was the French aristocracy or the stuff of Greek mythology. (12)

This perspective while highlighting the tendency for trans* identity to be associated with the magic, mystical, and bizarre also reveals several lines of flight for a trans* literary body of work. Themes of divinity, monstrosity, power and deception wind through a linear trans* history, connecting, overlapping, and creating paths which cut through the body of trans* literature. Addressing a trans* literary history using a thematic approach allows for the dissection of these categories in a meaningful way and the revelation of fantastic and ordinary trans* narratives.

Divinity

One path to a trans* literary history is carved out of religious and spiritual practices, stories, and texts. Huang argues that trans* literary scholarship does not have to look far in order to find examples of "gender-ambiguous imagery" in eastern religions (87). Buddhist, Confucianist, and Taoist texts dating from the first century B.C.E. all leave space for a nonbinary approach to and conceptualization of the world (Huang). He discusses the portrayal of deities and their interactions with humans such as Bao-yu in the Qing dynasty work *Dream of the Red Chamber* "could have been but was not recognized for its transgender content" (87).

Additionally, Carola Erika Lorea notes in "Pregnant Males, Barren Mothers, and Religious Transvestism: Transcending Gender in the Songs and Practices of 'Heterodox' Bengali Lineages" that many Taoist texts and icons reference the "golden embryo," a product of spiritually significant male pregnancy (174). Vedic and Hindu religious works also depict gods birthing children, but not male pregnancy itself (Lorea). These texts still hold value in the representation of trans* literary becoming because they destabilize Western cis-heteropatriarchy's standards. The Baul and Fakir saying *prakṛti haẏe karo prakṛti saṅga* which translates to "first become a woman and then unite with a woman" highlights the exaltation of the feminine in pursuit of piety (Lorea 175). Various North American indigenous cultures took part in this concept of sacred femininity and gender transgression as well.

Numerous tribes have or had shamans whose gender diverse and two-spirit identities were viewed as neutral or even positive (Califia 136). Although, because of the destruction of indigenous ways of life, many shamanistic practices have been lost to history. Patrick Califia argues against a pan-America perspective regarding indigenous cultures and calls for examination of distinct tribal cultures stating:

> It is probable that each Native American tribe that allocated a third-gender role defined this category in a different way, and attitudes about such people would vary not only from tribe to tribe but would be affected by many other variables as well, such as the amount or type of contact with disapproving Europeans, or the personality and talents of the berdache herself. (124)

It is unwise to try to ascribe a particular fixed and modern identity to these gender diverse individuals. From a historical standpoint, it would be overly simplistic to assert that every indigenous tribe associated two-spirit individuals with divinity. This claim would also fall prey

to the eurocentric method of categorization that places all indigenous people into a single homogenous group.

In addition to the cultural complexities faced by scholars analyzing indigenous gender concepts, there is also a history of self-imposed limitations presented by queer scholarship itself. Indigenous gender diverse identities have often been neglected by gay academia for the sake of diverse sexual identities. Critical of *The Spirit and the Flesh: Sexual Diversity in American Indian Culture* by Walter L. Williams, Califia notes, "Williams is so eager to disassociate the berdache from gender ambiguity that he even disputes the label of 'hermaphrodite,' despite the fact that among the Navajo, the term *nadle* refers both to people with ambiguous genitalia and physiques, and those who would 'pretend to be *nadle*'" (133-34). In this context, it is also important to remember that historically gender identity and sexuality were viewed as more closely related than in our contemporary conceptualization.

Considering Eurocentric religions, Christianity provides a complex history. The early medieval Church "crack[ed] down on any practices which blurred the distinctions of gender" (Gazzoli 465). This is due to an association of gender transgressive behavior with degradation and moral depravity. One theologian, Ambrose, disseminated a great deal of homophobic and transphobic ideology that lives on in modern conservative Christian theology. This ideology is rooted in the early Gnostic beliefs of male spiritual superiority and preexisting Roman misogyny. Gazzoli notes: "Early Christianity framed virtues in masculine language: to be courageous, strong, prudent, and restrained was manly, while femininity was associated with fickleness, weakness, lasciviousness, and rage" (465). Thus, while it was considered noble for a woman to want to become more like a man, men who emulated what were deemed feminine qualities were ridiculed and even punished. Specifically Gnostic tradition in early Christianity "stressed the

need for women to 'become male' in order to pursue sanctity" and achieve salvation (Gazzoli 465).

When considering a trans* literary history, Erik Wade, author of "Religion and Trans Literature," argues for the inclusion of the text *The Martyrology.* He notes of this work, "likely composed in the ninth century" but now recovered "in fragmentary form in multiple manuscripts" a depiction of Christian saints "whose lives exceed the gender binary" (56). The representation of these transmasculine and nonbinary holy people is complex as there is a history of misogyny within the Catholic church. Many historians wonder whether these individuals were accepted so readily because of the staunchly anti-women rhetoric of the period. One saint who Wade examines in this context is St. Thecla; "St. Thecla is assigned female at birth but becomes a monk, something that causes the Old English author to describe Thecla as 'hy,' a word that could be the first instance in English of a plural third-person pronoun being used in the singular" (56). This use could indicate an acknowledgement of St. Thecla's incongruence between assigned sex at birth and lived gender and physically locate trans* personhood within the structure of the Catholic Church.

One limitation within this location is the historic and contemporary misogyny of the Christian church. Christian divinity was associated exclusively with masculinity until the late medieval period when theologians began to consider the sacrifice of the Body of Christ feminine as the body is given up and used (Gazzoli 467). Burzyńska also notes the shift in thinking which regarded the Body of Christ as "gender fluid, graced by the feminine element" by the Renaissance period (474). Julian of Norwich, an anchoress and theologian, was the first Christian theologian to argue the genderless and gender-ful nature of the portion of the trinity referred to as God the Creator/Father. In *The Showings of Julian of Norwich: a New Translation*, Julian names

the Wisdom of God the Creator as “our Mother” while Jesus Christ is acknowledged as a separate component with the title “Mother of Mercy” (Starr 161). In addition to building on past theological works which depict the Christ’s Body as feminine, she argues that God is our Mother in a very full and omniscient sense, that the material world is enclosed in a “divine womb” which is the presence of Mother God (Earle 166). Julian of Norwich offers a rare glimpse into a Christian theology which venerated a feminine Godhead.

A more common Christian perspective of gender emphasizes a “veneration” of the transmasculine and rejection of the feminine. This perspective is strengthened by its intersection with the European medieval period’s cultural conceptions of race (Wade 52). Trans-femininity was often associated with the Muslim and Jewish cultures of the near east and considered undesirable. One glossator from the medieval period associated the old English word *bædling* (which has since lost any definable meaning) with intersex myths in Turkey (Wade). The *bædling* identity is referenced in the Canons of Theodore, a confession guide for priests, and having sex with these individuals is compared to prostitution. This could mean that the identity was associated with gender nonconforming individuals assigned male at birth as well as with sexually submissive men, but it could also mean that the church regarded these two identities as linked or synonymous as well.

Monstrosity

The refracted image of divinity, monstrosity offers another entry point into trans* literature. Burzyńska notes a tightening of gender expression in both literature and culture of the Renaissance period. Any sort of natural variance in sex or presentation in gender was regarded as threatening and volatile thus “bodily unreadability” was policed by the general population as well as institutions (475). This resulted in “racialized” conceptualizations of femininity and

masculinity as well as "monstrosity or animality" ascribed to gender variant individuals, especially for people of color (475). While this thread will be discussed at length in chapter three when considering the use of monstrosity in trans* apocalyptic work, I emphasize now the historic implications of monstrosity.

The link between transgender identity and monstrosity lies in treatment of individuals who disrupt a hegemonic system. Melanie A. Marotta, author of "Gothic Fiction as Trans Literature" regards monstrosity as "[representative] of the transgender person's experience in Western society" that "accepts or rejects people based on gender construct" (342). While the broad category of 'monster' can represent the experience of the social outlier, the nature of specific monsters can take on specific meanings regarding race, sexuality, and gender. For example, a vampire turning can also be used to parallel experiences of transgender people pre- and post-transition (Sharp). Considering literature's most famous vampire, Jolene Zigarovich, author of "Victorian Literature as Trans Literature," highlights Dracula's embodiment of gender and his tendency toward gender transgression. Dracula is described as "strange," a word in this period's context used to indicate queer identity (Zigarovich 510). Bram Stoker's monster challenges separatist notions of gender with his hermaphroditic qualities. Zigarovich notes: "The 'hard' phallic teeth of the vampire combined with the 'soft, shivering touch of the lips' mark the vampiric mouth as a sexual mixture… And uniquely, Dracula can penetrate as well as procreate and symbolically breastfeed" (510). This combination of traits used to mark gender generates a sense of unease in a culture that very much upheld distinct and binary gender expectations. Dracula's very nature "resembles transgender embodiment" with his "[perceived] monstrosity, shapeshifting, and body exchange" (Zigarovich 511). Each of these qualities exude a sense of flexibility which unsettles and disrupts adherents of rigid systems of hierarchy.

Power

Trans* literature has long connected to power because trans* identities disrupt hegemonic cultural systems. Michael Mayne, author of "The Radical Novel as Trans Literature," notes that the mere existence of transgender individuals challenges the "naturalization" of cisgender and heteronormative identity (440). At its core, naturalization connects individual identities with fixed and stereotypical versions of gender in order to uphold a "social stasis" (441). As Califia notes of the rhetoric disseminated by Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminists: "fundamentalism offers us reductionist theories about how the world works, what went wrong, and how to fix it" (89). Trans* literature challenges this by offering various alternate versions of embodied identity.

Historically this means locating responses to the question of personhood. Kelly Swartz argues that "gender diversity and gender nonconformity unfold in relation to other historical structures with which they are imbricated;" these structures include "systems of colonial wealth accumulation, processes of racialization, and nationalist projects" (483). In the European period of the Enlightenment this reserves "personhood" only for the most powerful individuals in this cultural context, "white, heterosexual, cisgender men capable of relative financial independence" (Swartz 488). This perspective helps explain the interplay between gender and other personal identities such as race and citizenship.

The trans* narrative of 'passing' can be connected to historic concealment of race for the purpose of achieving freedom or avoiding danger, but, additionally, the very concept of gender has varying applications dependent on race. During chattel slavery, white Americans denied any type of gender differences between Black enslaved individuals. Differences in culture also complicate matters as the hegemonic culture often establishes gender normative behaviors that

are not universal. Stryker, in *Transgender History,* notes that during westward expansion a significant amount of anger was directed toward Chinese immigrants in California. The sentiment among many white American individuals was that the gender presentation of the Chinese population was too ambiguous and therefore unacceptable. Identifying markers such as hair and clothing style were uniform in a way that starkly contrasted the binary of American gender presentation (35-6). These overlapping themes reveal potential for intersectional analysis utilizing a trans* lens as well as the potential for cisgender individuals to also be victims of transphobic prejudices.

For these aforementioned reasons, scholars may approach the interplay between trans* literature and power in various ways. One may take the perspective that centers trans* literature and its peripheral implications regarding power or begin with the novel criticizing power and work outward towards its implications regarding gender transgression. For the former, one way the interplay between power dynamics and identities can be expressed is through pronoun usage. Swartz notes: "...careful attention to shifts in perceived gender by the narrator recognizes the importance of social positioning to gender assignment and the possibility of occupying numerous positions at once" (486). Some characters transgress gender boundaries in order to gain social mobility while others seem to transgress boundaries for personal gain or pleasure. The distinction of environment is crucial when mapping a character's gender transgressive behaviors.

Considering literary works which are critical of power as the primary focus allows a scholar to locate discourse on gender transgression in a broader way. While the mainstream trans* novel may be considered a new development, Michael Mayne also argues that its position can be directly tied to the radical novel which has been "a weapon against reactionary politics for over 100 years" (441). Gender transgression approached through the form of the radical novel is

effective because it is central to the conversation of hierarchy. Gender impacts virtually every facet of life. Mayne argues, "so much of who we are and how we are supposed to be" relies on gender and its expression (442). Reactionary politics often uses gender, specifically transgender identity as a flashpoint to incite fears of moral degradation and violence. This movement seeks to fix "human nature as static" and "human potential as already defined" (442). Gender essentialism's axioms exist as an antithesis to transgender realities. Mayne describes these axioms as reliance on a gender binary "premised on ideal versions of femininity and masculinity" and the understanding of this binary as "ahistorical…defined by karyotype distinction, genital form, internal sex organs, and external sex characteristics" (443). Visibility of transgender individuals, especially happy and fulfilled transgender individuals, defies this dogma and thus threatens the order. It "weakens the orthodoxy's currency" and provides space for doubt in this rigid model (442). Power of the institution is weakened with the weakening of orthodoxy, thus the trans* novel is inherently disruptive to the hegemonic institution no matter its contrived rhetorical purpose. This disruption inherently breeds violence often directed toward the disruptor and the disruptor's social network or immediate group.

When considering the overarching history of transgender people, perhaps the most danger and stigma are faced by non-passing individuals. Stryker explains that many individuals "have a great difficulty recognizing the humanity of another person if they cannot recognize that person's gender" (6). Binary transgender individuals who are more ambiguous in their presentation and androgynous nonbinary transgender individuals are regarded as subhuman or animalistic. Here, in a rather rhizomatic way, monstrosity intersects with performativity. Because humans tie the self and the gender so completely together "the gender-changing person can evoke in others a primordial fear of monstrosity or loss of humanness" (Stryker 6). Intersecting with power, this

fear is the locus of anti-trans sentiments in which "hatred, outrage, panic, or disgust" transform into "physical or emotional violence" (6). Herein is revealed the necessity of considering to what end visibility and representation function.

Performance Called Deception

The entry point of performance called deception is connected to the trans* individual's outward presentation. In literature this translates to the elements of suspense and descriptive characterization used to identify, and often ostracize, figures with non-normative forms of gender expression. Nowell Marshall, author of "Disability and Trans Literature" and "Romantic Literature as Trans Literature," explores the role gender performance has in reading characters as trans* and argues that because of Romantic scholars' lack of knowledge regarding gender performativity "characters who could be read as trans [are] read as disguised or in drag" (494). This distinction connects to Beemyn's idea regarding the importance of context when identifying gender variant behaviors. In this case, trans* characters are erased because the element of performativity is interpreted as a means of deception. Clothing has long been used as a cultural signifier of gender, hence the "rhetoric of deception" which surrounds this very use of clothing by trans* individuals is counterintuitive (Marshall 494). In a historic and literary context, Marshall argues that clothes provide a primary function of constructing the gender rather than obscuring the sex.

Performativity is key in the construction of gender and is markedly different from the type of performance exemplified in drag. Alexa A. Joubin regards performativity as "distinct from conventional understanding of performance as an artistic form" (29). Performativity instead includes both conscious and unconscious elements of communication which affect an overall social situation (Joubin). This distinction is important because much anti-trans rhetoric is rooted

in the claim that transgender individuals are playing pretend or putting on a show rather than embodying their true gender. When considering literature specifically, Joubin argues, "performativity, as distinct from performance, recalibrates our critical capacity to understand transness, understood here as acts of traversing and transversing normative gender categories" (29). One example of this performativity in broader literature can be located in the trope of body swapping or "malleable bodies" such as in Woolf's *Orlando* and Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* (29). This trope allows characters to transgress gender boundaries and embody or occupy another gender without becoming fixed in a permanently changed body.

When performativity is conceptualized by a largely cisgender readership, it can be misinterpreted as the aforementioned type of performance exemplified by drag or as an outright deception. In the latter case, suspense and a subsequent reveal of the 'true' identity unmasked the trans* person or character as a liar. In "Suspense and Trans Literature," Sam Holmqvist discusses this narrative pattern using concepts related to the mystery genre: "Non-normative combinations of feelings, clothes, and looks become, as Shklovsky and Chekhov would phrase it, guns on the wall. Details of mismatched sex and gender are a signal that the reader should be on their guard: There is something strange going on here with this character. Be aware" (115). The character descriptions of those transgressing gender in the cisnormative suspense narrative are laden with incongruent physical features, dispositions, and clothing. Other descriptions focus on characters' broader aura of seemingly displaced femininity or masculinity. Examples of this include Charlotte Bronte's nun later revealed to be Count Hamas in *Villette* and the fortune teller later revealed to be Mr. Rochester in *Jane Eyre*. While the characters themselves are not trans*, they're used to toy with expression and presentation in a way that insinuates a certain level of dishonesty in gender ambiguity. Holmqvist notes that although this structure initially seems to

support the possibility of feminine men and masculine women, it uses the reveal portion of the narrative to "stabilize gender" and reinforce "gender incongruent characteristics… as not at all incongruent, but instead very much in line with cisnormative expectations" (117). While a trans* lens can be used to explore the intersections between performativity and deception, it is imperative that scholars consider the very real implications of this line of thinking as it relates to safety and visibility in the trans* community.

Dissecting the Medical Model

A Deficiency Model

Perhaps the most well-worn and strictly defined entry point into trans* literature is located in the medical conceptualization of transgender identity and the subsequent creation of the trans memoir. The medical conceptualization of transgender identity, also known as the medical model, argues for a clear and definable transgender identity. In years past, this model has largely been approached using a deficiency model or a variance model.

A deficiency model regards any non-normative form of gender expression as debasing and even dangerous. Much of the published work that takes this perspective regarding gender-transgressive individuals, be they transgender folks or cross-dressers, establishes links between gender transgression and delinquency or sexual deviance. Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis* is one such work which represents the gender-transgressive person as "a compulsive thief who may injure someone who possesses an item of apparel that he feels driven to obtain, [one] who is also an obsessive masturbator, and a danger to himself and others" (Califia 13). The pool from which Krafft-Ebing pulled for his work included a large number of individuals who were under psychiatric care or imprisoned. Thus, the image presented is not an actual reflection of transgender individuals as a whole. Califia argues that "in the world of Krafft-Ebing there is no

such thing as benign sexual variation. Everyone who departs from the reproductive, monogamous, male-dominated heterosexuality is described as criminally insane" (13). This type of representation relates directly to Stryker's belief that the arch of progress for transgender individuals parallels that of the acceptability of cisgender men's transgression of gender norms (95). Historically, when gender roles are more lax, transgender individuals see better treatment and less violence. Conversely, when gender roles are emphasized, anti-trans violence becomes more explosive at the societal level. Because gender roles and rules regarding sexuality were so stringent during the Victorian period, trans* individuals were met with significant violence.

Another element of the deficiency model is its direct linking of gender transgressive behaviors to physical and mental disabilities. The pathologization of gender transgressive behaviors in the Victorian period meant that trans* individuals were considered defective and alongside other non-normative groups, were studied with morbid curiosity by thinkers of the time. Jolene Zigarovich notes that: "Combining phrenology with other pseudosciences, [Lombroso's] eugenic, hereditary defect theories were used as frameworks for sexologists such a Krafft-Ebing to 'scientifically' explain human sexual behavior and abnormalities" (507). Sexology served as a groundwork for the medical model of trans identity.

The literary world intersects rather forcefully with the deficiency model in both Victorian and Modernist works. In the late Victorian period, *The Well of Loneliness* by John Radclyffe Hall links gender transgression with impairment in such a way. Although *The Well of Loneliness* has long been heralded as *the* lesbian text, it can also be interpreted to be a work about transmasculinity. Historically, the understanding of sexuality and gender identity were enmeshed because of the problematic concept of gender "inversion" (Stryker 34). Because of this trans* texts are often part of a broader conversation with themes of sexuality. Transgender

autobiography and early queer fiction are linked because "in early gay fiction, homosexual men and lesbians were portrayed as being gender-deviant to a much greater extent than in queer short stories and novels published today" (Califia 197). Hall, a self-identified 'invert,' uses other characters' commentary on Stephen to emphasize perceived defects both physical and mental (Marshall). This interplay can be applied more broadly to disability studies and transgender studies as a whole because both groups seek to de-pathologize the body. In order to de-pathologize gender transgression and allow variance without punishment, the system itself must shift. Nowell Marshall references Robert McRuer's theorization that "compulsory able-bodiedness produces disability just as compulsory heterosexuality produces queerness," and often compulsory heterosexuality, or in this case cisgenderism, produces a perceived "social disability" for trans* individuals (233). In order for gender transgressive individuals to have what Hall would call "a right to existence" the deficit model must be dismantled.

The transition to a variance medical model rather than a deficit medical model coincided largely with the Modernist period of literature. In "Modernist Literature as Trans Literature," Todd G. Nordgren describes this period as a time where "extensive developments in medical knowledge and technology… interrogated the boundaries of sex and gender" (514). The literary world began to acknowledge the possibilities for transformation that medical science offered not just trans* individuals but the general population. Modernist perspectives regarding science and transformation can be seen in both the sensationalized representation of trans* life in literature and in the use of trans* as a means of exploring the written form (Nordgren). This exploration of form happened largely in the interrogation of "transition, gender nonconformity, and the complex relationship of trans bodies to medicalized techniques" (Nordgren 515). The emergence of the concept of adolescence also impacted the public opinions regarding sexual and gender

identity. Focusing on a tumultuous period where individuals supposedly had the potential for heightened misconduct, this process "extended the kinds of conceptual slippages found in both sexological and literary depictions of gendered and sexual deviance in the Victorian period" (Nordgren 515). Because of the continued visceral representation of gender transgression, fear surrounding trans* identity and threats of violence remained a prominent social component for trans* individuals.

In order to combat the violence experienced by gender nonconforming individuals, Earl Lind/ Jennie June wrote two autobiographies: one with the audience of medical professionals in mind and one with the general public in mind (Stryker 41). These works, published in the late 1910's and early 1920's are the earliest noted works with a specific purpose of normalizing trans* existence. By the time Christine Jorgensen published her book in 1967, many people were aware that transgender people existed but associated them with sensational and erotic forms of autobiography. Stryker notes: "In a year when hydrogen bombs were being tested in the Pacific, war was raging in Korea, England crowned a new queen, and Jonas Salk invented the polio vaccine, Jorgensen was the most written-about topic in the media" (47). People had a morbid fascination with trans* individuals which Jorgensen attempted to harness and transform into sympathy and understanding, just like Jennie June had almost fifty years earlier. These two memoirs represent a shift in the medical model and in trans* literature. The trans* memoir was able to gain traction and was utilized as a steppingstone to–and guiding path for–a variance model of transgender identity.

A Variance Model

A variance model of transgender identity is still very much rooted in a medical and diagnostic understanding of trans* individuals. Rather than arguing that the subject themselves is

deficient because of their gender transgressive behaviors, the variance model locates the problem in the incongruence between assigned gender at birth and gender identity.

Psychologists and physicians contributed to the formation of this medical model of transgender identity in western culture. Dr. Harry Benjamin, a gender researcher from the mid-twentieth century noted normal chromosomes but genital abnormalities in one third of the individuals he diagnosed with "transsexualism," and one half had no concrete cause or excessive variation (Califia 52). One theory explored by Dr. Benjamin was a correlation between transgender identity and prenatal hormone exposure (Califia 53). Benjamin rejected the notion of aversion therapy as a means of treating transgender patients and pushed back against the notion of a single defining factor of sex (Califia 54). In fact, Califia notes, "[Benjamin] delineated several kinds of sex: chromosomal, genetic, anatomical, legal, gonadal, germinal, endocrine (hormonal), psychological, and social. If all these different sorts of sex exist, which should hold sway?" (55). While this may seem a radical notion for his time, Benjamin was still, according to Califia, very much "in the business of helping disturbed and upset people fit into society as much as possible" (59). These distinctions between kinds of sex serve to bolster the argument that transgender individuals were just born with some type of congenital difference that causes them to *actually* be another sex, thus reinforcing the medical model which considered transgender individuals a social abnormality to be disappeared via assimilation with the magic of hormones and surgeries.

Part of this model relies on separating transgender individuals from others categorized similarly as sexually deviant. Califia argues that this separation is still upheld in forms of transgender representation in literature:

> The picture of the transexual as someone who is "often asexual or masturbates on occasion, imagining himself to be female" continues as a truism in the case literature today. Medical people are unable to countenance castration or penectomy unless the genetic male in question eschews any penile pleasure and utterly rejects his "useless" organ; the belief in transsexual asexuality also sanitizes the transsexual and serves to raise him or her above the rest of sex deviates. (58)

Although written in the 1990's, this assessment of the transgender person's relationship with sexuality and the medical field remains accurate. Often transgender individuals must prove themselves variant enough or "sick" enough to justify their need for treatment.

At its core, the variance model equates the level of a person's transness to the extremeness of their dysphoria, their willingness to use hormones, and the number of gender affirming surgeries they have had or plan to have. Stryker notes that "[Gender Identity Disorder] is very controversial within transgender communities. Some people resent having their sense of gender labeled as a sickness, while others take great comfort from believing they have a condition that can be cured with proper treatment" (13). This treatment was contingent on the portrayal of transness as "sickness" because sickness is what often "legitimizes medical intervention" (Stryker 37). At its core, the "social power of medicine" offered transgender individuals a level of conditional protection (Stryker 36). The opportunity cost of this protection is the artistic expression of an entire movement. The elevated position of power is occupied by the physician. The memoir occupies this precarious space within the medical model, wedged between the power of the physician and the expectations of the public. Here lies the building tension necessary for an eruption of trans* literature in a post-medical framework.

Chapter Two: Evolving Theory and Diversifying Literature

Linking Trans* Culture to Trans* Literature

While chapter one looks to the past to explore several possible paths by which one could trace a trans* literary tradition, chapter two shifts its attention to the relationship that exists between mid-twentieth century transgender memoirs and modern trans* literature. Culture often influences the creation and reception of literary works, and the case of the transgender memoir is no different. As public attitude regarding gender diversity and gender norm transgression evolved, so evolved published works' representation of trans* identity. Chapter one of this paper "Historical Connections and Rhetorical Applications" notes that in recent history the transgender memoir served as a response to a specific cultural moment's fears and prejudices. However, as the cultural understanding of trans* identity has evolved, it has become apparent that the traditional transgender memoir has significant rhetorical and literary limitations. Aaron Hammes explains: "For trans studies to "pass" as a "legitimate" discipline for knowledge production in the Academy, it must perhaps cease to become—it must instead be" (452). This type of thinking requires trans* literature to be "absorbed into the… Canon" or "somehow stand on its own as a field of minority literary inquiry" (452-3). This relates to the current explosion of published trans* creative work and the current conversation regarding categorization of these works and, I argue, specifically to works such as Kai Cheng Thom's *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars: a Dangerous Trans Girl's Confabulous Memoir.* Looking toward the future of trans* literature, one must first navigate the stagnation and restriction brought on by the rigidity of the medical model and the dissemination of its rhetoric through the transgender memoir.

The Transgender Memoir's Rhetorical Limitations

The rhetorical limitations of the transgender memoir are inextricably linked to the historic purpose of transgender literature. Beemyn cites Christine Jorgensen's memoir as a "groundbreaking" work for transgender literary history as it was the first time mainstream American culture encountered a personal transgender story from a respected member of society (115). This memoir outlined the life of an extremely palatable transgender woman. Jorgensen, a former soldier with a number of intersex qualities that made her desire to transition easier for the public to understand, lived a largely sanitized and de-sexed life. These qualities of Jorgensen's story contrasted radically with transgender autobiographies published prior. Many of these earlier memoirs were categorized as "generally lurid exposes of female impersonators, strippers, and prostitutes with tabloid titles" (Beemyn 115). Regarding the works prior to Jorgensen's as lurid and tabloid-like speaks to the natural friction between transgender works and the literary canon due to the central argument of acceptable and unacceptable content and forms.

Some scholars praise the work of simplistic transgender stories such as Jorgensen's memoir because they helped shift a public perception that regarded transgender individuals as "mentally disordered" to one that understood the rates of transgender mental illness to be directly correlated to emotional distress brought on by gender dysphoria (Beemyn 117). Califia argued in his 1997 book *Sex Changes: The Politics of Transgenderism* the invaluable nature of a transgender narrative, stating:

> Because the validity of gender dysphoria remains controversial, and transsexual experience is seen as something rare, freakish, artificial, and incomprehensible, transsexual autobiography continues to be an invaluable vehicle for education and outreach. Such work both normalizes sex reassignment for people who are not

> transgendered and informs people who are unhappy with their biological sex that they have alternatives to misery and self-destruction. (158)

Thus, the transgender narrative could be framed as benefiting both the cisgender and transgender readership as it would allow cisgender readers to more fully understand the transgender experience and it would allow transgender readers to validate their own experiences. It could be understood as a progressive step toward cultural inclusivity and tolerance.

However, many scholars and activists reject this assertion that the memoir and the broader political conversation surrounding it has benefited the broader queer community. Stryker notes that gay liberationists who were not well-versed in trans* issues often regarded transgender activists and scholars as "'not liberated' and lacking in political sophistication" as well as being "still mired in an old-fashioned 'preliberation' engagement with the establishment" (98). This perspective may have been shaped by the fact that many transgender individuals vehemently denounced allegations of homosexuality both verbally and in the written form of memoir. This, Califia argues, relates directly to the limitations imposed by the medical model of transgender identity: "A transsexual who retained any consciousness about his or her sexual-minority status after reassignments would not have been seen as a success by the 'authorities' who administered the gender clinics" (199). This tension between the gay and transgender community can ultimately be understood as an ongoing argument regarding whether or not to assimilate into the predominant culture. Califia argues that because transgender people were "admonished to blend in" they were unable to rally together or form "any sort of political lobby" (212). By this logic, the memoir would only serve to inhibit the trans* community's struggle for liberation from "medical-psychiatric oppression" (Stryker 98). In addition to these political implications, this pattern of assimilation has very real social implications.

Considering the social impact of transgender visibility in literature and culture, Tesla Cariani asks a series of questions: “To what point are we tipping? Visibility of whom to whom? Social justice for whom? Assimilation of whom? A shift in public discourse by whom and about whom? Does visibility actually mean serving as a profitable commodity?” (135). These questions raise valuable perspectives that are often overlooked by the broader population. They also challenge the belief that visibility is something the transgender community should be continuously striving toward. A hidden social power structure is also revealed in Cariani’s assertion that “trans people are not yet authorized to set the terms of our own visibility” (135). There is a certain amount of bargaining that must be done to garner respect, and concessions must be made by the transgender community in order to remain palatable for the population.

The desire to be palatable, readable, and sellable has largely influenced the conditions of trans* visibility in media and literature. In application to literature, Cariani argues, “to be visible, we must conform to the demands placed on us by a public that wants to buy a story” (135). This can mean marketing trans* suffering to enthrall a voyeuristic readership, adhering to a conventional but ill-fitting form to attract the attention of publishers, or completely eliminating risqué portions of a life story. Beyond meeting the demands of a curious public, trans* storytelling has often afforded or barred trans* individuals access to medical care. Because “the reception, form, and function of trans literature” have all been impacted by the social visibility afforded by the implementation of the medical model the trans* community has often found itself saddled with literary expectations from doctors and the general public (Cariani 133). In “Inclusion and Trans Literature,” Sawyer K. Kemp regards these expectations as “pressure to conform with sexological medical and psychiatric models in order to justify their existence and transition” (158). Because the medical model has the tendency to strip the transgender

individual's story of any outlying information, early transgender-authored stories experienced a "flattening of trans personhood and life as synonymous with their medical history" (Kemp 158). The cost of this flattening is a representation void of the complexities of humanity. In "Life Writing as Trans Literature," Eamon Schlotterback notes, "in producing a legible trans subject, such narratives defang some of the transgressive potential of trans life" (269). Therefore, many transgender memoirs begin by recounting a childhood littered with bodily clues which point toward gender difference and end with gender affirming surgeries. This constant transposition of the medical model onto the real lives of trans* individuals influences both whose stories are told and how they are told.

Considering the form of the traditional transgender memoir, one can note a strict adherence to a standardized plot structure. Although in recent years trans* works have been afforded a bit more flexibility, western and colonial ideologies have still influenced the trans* stories available for reader consumption. Janet Mock asserts that "the genre of memoir from trans people has been dominated by those with access" (2014, 256) (qtd. Eastwood 45). This can be applied also to other emerging categories of published trans* works. Ultimately, educated white westerners still have a near monopoly on the trans* stories being told. When analyzing Jan Morris's memoir *Conundrum*, one can clearly see the link between the author's colonial ideas and their own ideas regarding gender. Alexander Eastwood uses this work to explore the way canon reinforces imperialist hierarchies. Of Morris's own emotions regarding her transition, Eastwood states, "transsexuality poses no threat for Morris in this schema for she likens her conquest and ultimate sublimation of her own innate sense of difference to an imperialist act, in which Britain colonizes other parts of the world and remakes them in its own image" (42-43). Many of the stories similar to Morris's served to offer a terminal path to normalcy rather than

explore the expansive opportunities transness affords. Eastwood regards this path as "a reincorporation into the body politic through the binary gender system" (43). Once this mentality shifted, there was what Eastwood regards as a "fixation on anti-normativity" where "assimilation… was no longer the point" (44). This perspective challenges both binary transition stories told in popular culture and the assumptions we can make about what constitutes trans* literature or a trans* literary canon.

Eastwood also explains that transness and cisness are too polar to explain every relation to one's own body, "Where does one draw the line between body dysphoria that is innately trans, driven from within one might argue, and that which results from externally imposed body standards? It can be challenging to account for the precise origins of the fraught ways in which one relates to their body, the text suggests, particularly for trans women who face the double impact of transphobia and misogyny" (44). A form which insists on firm categorization and binary thinking hampers not only gender expression but artistic and literary expression as well.

Trans as Method

In order to identify examples of trans* literature that exist outside the narrow confines of the transgender memoir genre, one must first, as discussed in chapter one, use a trans* literary lens. Considering her model "trans as method," Joubin argues that in true trans* expression and artistry involves centering trans* perspectives and decentering cisgender ones. Concepts such as rejection of performativity and visibility, and deconstruction of genre and binary thinking serve to illuminate a trans as method reclamation of trans* literature.

Rejection of Performativity and Visibility

When trans* literature refuses to accept the cultural expectations regarding performativity and visibility, it situates itself alongside other works of minor literature. More specifically, trans

minor literature emerges when public and political "thought experiments" regard trans* identity as "an object of debate, necessitating defense" (Hammes 449). Debates of this caliber call a cisgender public/readership to become a judicial power authorizing denial of trans* autonomy in both public and literary spheres. Because of the implication of this dynamic, the rejection of both performativity and visibility are largely related to a role revision for the cisgender readership. While previous memoirs sought to earn rights and respect by catering to non-trans* readers, Joubin's "trans as method" texts center trans* experiences and trans* becoming for the enrichment of trans* culture. Joubin suggests "trans as method [as] a systemic method of interpreting the performativity of speech acts, [to serve] disempowered communities… [by acknowledging] the space inhabited by atypical bodies while avoiding replicating the mis-categorization of trans individuals" (37-8). Inclusion then becomes "intentioned engagement with transness" rather than "euphemism for institutions" (38). Thus, this method of trans study would serve (whether overtly or inadvertently) to critique the existing framework. As Joubin notes, "the notion of performativity has the power to destabilize the idea of singularity and the perceived absolutism of gender as a signifier" (38). With the single transition narrative destabilized, trans* literature can reverse the flattening of trans* personhood and represent the heterogeneity of experience while centering the trans* rather than the cisgender audience.

Visibility serves as an element of performativity but also as a separate political and rhetorical strategy that the trans* community has long contended with. Cariani argues that "visibility… consistently positions trans people as targets" (141). This vulnerability, which can largely be viewed as the cost for visibility as a minority people, adds depth and complexity to the idea of trans* representation in literature. Additionally, the way we see and know bodies is "discursive… [and] often mediated through our perception and ideologies" (136). The

implication of this discursive seeing is that each person will construct a different meaning based on previous experiences and background. Thus "the continual production and reproduction of trans visibility" largely dictates the form of the trans* literary narrative in a reciprocal nature (136). Authors of trans* texts then must negotiate with the representations of trans* identity already present and generate alternate forms for an audience diverse in both perspectives and level of familiarity with trans* concepts. The construction of the trans* narrative then must "navigate tensions between seeing/knowing, hypervisibility/invisibility, and consumption/ creation" (136). The exploration of each of these dichotomies serves to enrich both the creation and the consumption of trans* literary text in which "trans as method" is utilized. These texts would then be understood as both forms of negotiation regarding representation and art rather than positive public relation material for a cisgender audience. This is often achieved via "a refusal to repeat patterns and a refusal to present coherent narratives of trans identity, experience, or feeling" (139). Thus, the construction of a visible transgender identity for public consumption is avoided altogether in favor of trans* creative expression.

Deconstruction of Genre Conventions and Binary Systems

As the trans* story has moved beyond the confines of the memoir it has pushed social and literary boundaries of categorization. Its newly expanded reach encompasses many genres. In "Trans Poetics and Trans Literature," Nicole Anae asks the reader to draw specific attention to the "lived experience" genres such as memoir, biography, autobiography, and speculative memoir (258). With an emphasis on these genres as sites of transformation rather than the only acceptable form, scholars can identify a potential for evolution in trans* scholarly work. The bending of genre expectations in trans* literature can be understood as the result of the melding of trans as method with the expectations of the genre being utilized. Anae argues that because

"trans as genre is writing the self" there are four distinct categories of trans* relation to broader genre to be considered. These four categories speak to the larger purpose and audience of works that "trans as method" seeks to redefine: "trans writing about trans people; trans writing by and for trans people; writing that 'speaks to' the trans person/reader; and trans writing that fails to 'speak to' the trans person/reader" (257). This perspective urges scholars to look beyond the explicit identities of author or character and toward the rhetorical function of text to understand trans* influence on genre. Additionally, as important as it is to remember that there is not one distinct transgender form Anae also argues that there is not one distinct kind of transgender reader. She argues that because the intended audience impacts the creative work "the rhetoric of poetics…is unfixed, plural, and unstable" (260). The inherent polyvocality that emerges when negotiating trans* literature as a genre and intersecting with genre reveals another compelling rhizomatic form. This form must be harnessed in some way in order to be defined and understood by the broader population. In the case of trans* polyvocality, because of numerous heterogeneous voices, umbrella terms like trans or trans* can be useful to "speak about a number of … experiences [while] leav[ing] room for future invention, experimentation, and affirmation" (260). The negotiation of the boundary then evolves into a cultural debate over what constitutes trans*, as is mentioned in the introductory chapter of this work.

Looking to other genres, trans* representation can be considered inherently rhetorical because of the cultural implication of visible trans* existence, not all works that include a trans* character are works of trans* literature. Mayne's "The Radical Novel as Trans Literature" explains the criteria set by the Topside test, invented by Tom Léger and modeled after the Bechdel test. This test asks: "(1) Does the book include more than one trans character? (2) Do they know each other? (3) Do they talk to each other about something besides a transition-related

medical procedure?" (Mayne 442). These criteria again ask scholars to divorce trans* literature from a medical model of transgender identity.

In a cultural context, this divorce allows for a more complex understanding of gender identity. In 1997, Califia had already identified a trend in trans* activism which labeled the binary gender system as dysfunctional. Rather than pleading for treatment for a medical condition or a mental illness, gender dysphoria, these activists sought to change the way gender is defined socially and used in our lives (208-9). Transgender historian Stryker notes how this call for a deconstruction of gender binary often coincided with a broader pursuit of justice for "atypical members" of society (150). When framing this new more inclusive type of transgender presence, Stryker references Leslie Feinberg's semi-autobiographical novel *Stone Butch Blues* (1991). She notes a subtle shift in delivery with an "emotional flavor of hir transgender vision to a large and appreciative international audience" (124). Stryker also references Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/ La Frontera* which values "the power to be found in being mixed, in crossing borders, of having no one clear category to fit into— of being essentially impure" (125). This direct attack on gender binary is the antithesis of what the classic transgender memoir sought to accomplish. It refuses to represent trans* individuals in a sanitized and precise way and instead utilizes a more nuanced sentiment of intersectionality.

Rejection and Reconfiguration of the Memoir in *Fierce Femmes*

Although Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues* and Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/ La Frontera* present themselves as alternatives to the previous conceptions of transgender literature, perhaps the most blatant challenge to the rhetoric and form of the traditional transgender memoir is the contemporary work *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars: A Dangerous Trans Girl's Confabulous Memoir* by Kai Cheng Thom. Pushing back against this flattening of trans

personhood, Thom's novel tests the limits of memoir, the 'acceptable' transgender form. Kemp regards this subversion of form and content as "a fantastical trick coin paid against the devil's bargain of canonicity" (158). Thom's work moves beyond challenging the genre conventions established by the transgender memoir and instead manipulates them in order to achieve both metatextuality and expressive freedom. Kemp notes:

> Hallmarks of the sensational trans memoir genre haunt the edges of Thom's book but are reimagined through fabulism and the intrusions of an unreliable—excuse me, confabulous—narrator. This allows the book to have it both ways and to perform a reparative critique of those tropes. (158)

In addition to challenging memoir genre conventions, she challenges the content of the traditional transgender memoir by rejecting the notion of trans* identity as a journey. This concept applies to the representation of a journey away from trauma, a transgender medical journey, and a journey towards home. Additionally, Thom rejects the need for ideological or sexual purity in her work. This lengthy list of content revisions transforms what could have been a typical transgender memoir into a complex work which blurs the lines of genre and ushers in a new era of trans* literature.

Genre Conventions

In order to truly grasp the significance of Thom's work one must understand the way in which it intersects with and challenges genre conventions. Transgender literature's status as minor literature influences its social context and political value as a "refractive, often contrastive lens" used to analyze the majority (Hammes 448). Thom's work intersects with the genre of minor literature because of her own goals regarding storytelling. Considering previous stories told, both memoir and fiction, Thom critically regards them as "regurgitations of the same old

story that makes [trans* people] boring and dead and safe to read about" (3). This perspective highlights the tendency of many stories to represent trans* characters as either cured and reborn through the magic of "The Surgery" or martyrs of gender-based violence. This concept is further emphasized with a mocking, chant-like line in *Fierce Femmes* introductory chapter: "[s]ave the trans girls! Save the whales! Put them in a zoo!" (2). By being regarded as exotic, Thom argues, transgender individuals are not saved but trapped by stereotypes and violence born out of fetishization and fear.

Viewing trans* minor literature as a form of response to such conversation surrounding transgender identity ascribes power to trans* creative work. While minor literature still "operate[s] from within territory" of canon and genre regulations, it also works to "(de)construct the aforementioned structures according to logics and praxes of deterritorialization" (Hammes 450). It also has the "potential to challenge its forms… as well as operate them for its own communitarian ends" (Hammes 448). This looks like trans novels playing with genre and subgenre conventions. Thom's work also expresses an ability to operate within the system while actively fighting to dismantle it.

Not only does *Fierce Femmes* intersect with the genre of minor literature it also serves as a bridge between memoir and speculative fiction. For Thom's confabulous memoir, its ability to critique lies within its ability to imagine. Thom uses the introductory chapter of her work to critique popular culture's portrayals of "poor little trans girl[s] desperate for a ~~fairy godmother~~ doctor to give her boobs and a vagina and a pretty face" (Thom 2). This portrayal is highlighted with a thinly veiled reference to Caitlin Jenner's nomination for the Arthur Ashe Courage Award in 2015 playing on a nearby television. Thom recounts how the narrator kicks through the television in anger and completely shatters the screen. After this, the story pauses. Thom asks the

reader to reconsider the event. She retells the story this time inserting magical and fantastical elements:

> So instead of kicking, I blew a kiss at the TV. A spark jumped from my lips, skipped off my palm, and darted through the air to touch down gently on a close-up of her face. The screen exploded in a glorious symphony of electricity and shattering glass, and a thousand razor shards flew through the air and turned into crimson butterflies that danced through the room on their way out the window. (Thom 4)

After this vivid image is shared, the introductory chapter of the memoir ends. In a metaphorical sense, Thom's narrator shatters the traditional transgender memoir as she destroys the television, but in a very literal sense Thom herself shatters any illusion of adherence to the memoir genre. The reader is then left to question the reliability of this unnamed narrator who would so readily replace a destructive act with a metaphor for transformation. This idea of challenging ugly or difficult truths with the speculative reimaginings of magic emerge as a consistent theme throughout this work.

Trauma

In *Fierce Femmes*, Thom explores the use of magical imagery in place of the explicit depiction of traumatic events. This allows for the representation of complex trans* suffering in a genuine way without encouraging a spirit of voyeurism. In "Disability and Trans Literature," Nowell Marshall applauds Thom's dedication to these depictions and explains: "for Thom, narratives that refuse danger, trauma, and honesty to elicit sympathy from a cisgender audience kill trans women" (238). Thom refuses to shy away from many transgressive themes that would, by the medical model's standards, stand to discredit her trans-ness. Because much of the work done by the early trans memoir was crafted with the intention of improving the public opinion

regarding transgender individuals, many traditional memoirists emphasized how absolutely normal their childhoods were in order to avoid the risk of their trans-ness being attributed to trauma.

Thom, however, uses a recurring storm of bees to represent sexual trauma and its lingering effects. These bees return whenever people get too close "wriggling inside [the unnamed narrator], wherever [she] was touched, reminding [her] of what had happened" (Thom 25). Additionally, Thom uses the recurrent "Song of the Pocket Knife" poems to introduce readers to another taboo subject, self-harm. This trend of reimaginings and the use of fantastical falsehoods presents itself in various ways throughout the work. As soon as the reality of the narrator's painful childhood as a first generation Chinese immigrant has been established, Thom bends genre conventions again with a fantasy of beached mermaids "the smallest… nearly as long as an oil tanker" (11). It is against this backdrop that the narrator tells her sister that she is leaving her childhood home, the crooked house in the City of Gloom, to travel to the City of Smoke and Lights.

A large portion of this work is dedicated to exploring the trauma and turmoil brought on by the death of one of the transgender women living on the Street of Miracles alongside the narrator and her newfound community. Thom gives commentary on the lack of protection afforded trans women and the value of queer rage. One character notes, "The mayor and his pigs have always worked against us, not for us. Everyone knows that. If we want justice for Soraya, we'll have to take it ourselves" (Thom 66). Thom's narrator asks herself and the reader: "Does the Street shelter or sacrifice us? And what's the difference?" (67). In addition to giving a type of social justice commentary this portion of the story is also constructed through the use of several scenes of fantastical falsehoods and reimaginings. The narrator begins by asking herself "Do any

of the girls on the Street know Soraya's story? Or is it lost to me, lost to us all now?" (68). Rather than allowing Soraya to fade from the narrative and from existence without closure, the narrator constructs a story for Soraya "invent[ing] the details to the sound of the moths' wingbeats" (68). In this case, storytelling is used to exemplify the processing of trauma experienced by the narrator rather than to reimagine the trauma for a cisgender audience.

As the memoir draws to a close, Thom explores how forgiveness of the self contributes to post traumatic growth. It isn't until themes of forgiveness are explored that the narrator is able to put aside the recurring motifs of bees, ghost friend, and her knife. She bakes a forgiveness cake and "a swarm of killer bees rushes out of [her] mouth and flies out the window. Sunlight pours through and warms [her] face" (162). After this symbolic moment of freedom, the narrator chooses to have sex for the first time and Ghost Friend, one of the manifestations pointing to her experience of sexual trauma, disappears into thin air. Although this is a pivotal moment in the narrator's arc toward healing and post traumatic growth, Thom does not resign her character to a future "on a cloud of Transgender Happiness ™" but Thom instead doubles down on a conclusion that highlights again the work's major themes of personal struggle, reflection, and self-preservation rather than disappearing the complex trauma experienced by the narrator.

The Medical Journey

Thom's critique of the medical journey is multifaceted. In *Fierce Femmes*, when the narrator arrives at a doctor's office to discuss starting hormone replacement therapy, she observes the people around her as she waits to be seen. Thom uses this scene as an opportunity to infuse fantastical elements by representing the individuals in the waiting room as literal animals (54). Rather than exalting the position of the doctor through a positive supernatural representation, Thom degrades Dr. Crocodile via dialogue that is stilted and unnerving: "It's

always a pleasure for me to help girls like you make their dreams come true" (57). Dr. Crocodile asks the narrator if she wants to be a woman and she replies "Well, I am already a woman… I just want, you know, breasts" (57). This scene allows Thom to openly reject the "conventional narrative of 'terrible-present-in-the-wrong-body' to a 'better-future-in-the-right-body'" which tends to ignore "the complexities of trans experience that understands the body as a form of palimpsest or an archive" (Filipova 97). The scene ends with the narrator and the doctor discussing how she will pay for her hormone therapy: "and he is eating me with his eyes, his unwavering smile, as he leans forward to whisper his price" (Thom 59). This animalistic and predatory language alludes to some form of sexual harassment or assault from Dr. Crocodile in exchange for estrogen supplements.

In addition to portraying the character of the doctor with unflattering language, Thom attacks the broader idea of a medically induced trans* becoming. *Fierce Femmes*, operating within the genre of minor literature "offers a vocabulary of disidentity" and "remaps [the transgender 'journey'] as a perpetual and simultaneous running away from one set of responsibilities and towards an impossible self-actualization" (Hammes 451). This achronology can be considered frustrating as it defies "majoritarian reader's expectations for a journey with beginning-middle-end resolution" (Hammes 451). In this work this concept is explored by the juxtaposition of the medical transition scene with Dr. Crocodile ending in a depressing sort of defeat with Thom's immediate validation of her trans-ness in another way.

She launches into a story about her quest for the perfect heels and details her journey to an elderly trans woman's second-hand shop. Including this detail immediately after an overly negative representation of the medical model shifts the authority regarding the creation of gender to the narrator herself. Thom ends the chapter with the triumphant statement: "My heart is

pounding… Something inside me is different now, though I couldn't tell you what it was. All I know is, a femme's heels are serious business" (64). This acknowledgement of change reaffirms the transformation that has taken place and emphasizes its link to the narrator's relational identity within trans* community.

Home

The western conceptualization of transness is directly linked to the idea of an Odyssean return to home. This causes the stereotypical transition story to "follow an Aristotelean plot structure of beginning, middle, and end" where the subject "travel[s] between two genders" and "transition is inherently a kind of movement… which must always already possess a locus of arrival" (Eastwood 40). Home becomes a representation of both assimilation into society as one's desired gender and a transformation of one's body to align with that gender. In this type of story "home [is] sought and ultimately found in one's surgically altered body" which society could then "reincorporate as normative" (Eastwood 40). In these stories the focus is on reintegrating transgender individuals and trans stories alike into a rigid binary system. However, this is an overly simplistic representation of transition and as of late trans* scholars "have questioned home's utility as an organizing principle, noting 'home,' like identity itself, is composite" (40). Home has no set definition so the assumption that to transition is to 'come home' ignores the experiences of those trans* individuals who do not associate home with safety or who have not chosen to medically modify their bodies as part of the transition process. This centering of the homecoming narrative also lends itself to a stylistically simple type of storytelling which does not have the opportunity to play with temporality.

Fierce Femmes exemplifies current trends in trans* literature which rejects an Odyssean journey home and challenges the Aristotelian plot structure's temporality. Shifting away from

these structures serve as rebellion against the "cisgender power structure['s]" influence on the transition timeline (Filipova 95). Rather than reinforcing the same image of the trans* journey homeward, works like *Fierce Femmes* urge readers to reconsider their previous conceptions. As new voices are broadcast, there is a shift in the type of stories being told. Eastwood explains, "more recent trans literature has shown an interest in temporality as it relates to trauma and memory… dwelling less on moments of medical transition itself and more on how trans subjects contend with the past" (45). Some such stories which utilize an atypical form or asynchronous style of storytelling and decenter the homecoming narrative are Imogen Binnie's *Nevada*, Torey Peters' *Detransition Baby*, and Akwaeke Emezi's *Dear Senthuran*. Eastwood also emphasizes that there is no home nor any true arrival and by reminding scholars that "to center belonging is also implicitly to create a space of exclusion" (46). Susan Stanford Freedman, quoted by Filipova in "Temporality and Trans Literature," regards modernity in a largely rhizomatic manner: "multiple, contradictory, interconnected, polycentric" and "characterized by a series of ruptures and disjunctures that are both global and local, and that it emerges from a variety of cultural, historical, and political contexts" (Filipova 98). This perspective decenters Western thought on temporality and home altogether by emphasizing that there is no home nor any true arrival.

Thom's own exploration of the journey towards home exhibits many of these aforementioned qualities. Her narrator regards "The crooked house where we grew up" with anxiety, comparing it to "a giant spider web" that "stuck on you, grasped at you with its hungry windows and hungry doors, pulling you in so you couldn't leave, couldn't breathe, couldn't dream or achoo" (42). This is a far cry from the idyllic childhoods filled with normalcy and ennui perpetuated by the traditional transgender memoir. In stark contrast to the crooked house

in the beginning of the text, the narrator's new home in the city is described with an overt fondness.

The narrator emphasizes the contrasting realities of the pathetic physical state of the apartment and the physical and emotional safety it represents. The apartment is ultimately compared to a cocoon, a safe place fit for transformation (43). This description relocates the safe home typically reserved for the epilogue of the trans narrative to the middle of the story. The ending of *Fierce Femmes* then continues to defy expectations by uprooting the life the narrator has made for herself and by doubling down on her claim that she is "the greatest escape artist in the whole goddamn world" (185). This controversial portion of the text includes a scoffing note from the narrator dismissing the story she claims readers want to consume of "how I ran away from home like a little trans baby princess Cinderella, got rescued by a handsome transgender prince, and vanished happily into the vast palace of the middle class" (185). Thom in rejecting the narrative arc of homecoming emphasizes the sentiment of running toward freedom and self-expression rather than a fixed and stable home and identity.

Purity

The transgender memoir has long incorporated attitudes of ideological purity and binary thinking into its form. Considering the early medical form, Eamon Schlotterback draws connections between sexology writing and the dawn of the transgender autobiography, considering them "constrained by the prejudices of the author[s] who wield the ability to edit…" (272). Due to censorship and the desire to cater to a wider cisgender audience, these texts typically erred on the conservative side.

As early as the 1980's, some transgender authors attempted to break the mold of the narrow confines of the transgender autobiography. Renee Richards openly enjoyed the kink

culture of sado-masochism and wrote about it in her autobiography *Second Serve* (Califia 167). This is a far cry from the prim and almost asexual nature of the first wave of transgender autobiography. In his work, Califia also frames Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues* as a new type of transgender fiction. He states, "Feinberg makes a strong connection between butch identity as a gender apart from male or female" highlighting Feinberg's tendency to challenge the binary thinking prevalent in western culture (188). Also critical of this western conception of transgender identity, Kate Bornstein's criticizes binary systems altogether and subscribes to anarchistic views of gender (247). These dissenting voices have laid the groundwork for Thom who openly defies ideological purity including binary thinking using Foucault's "reverse discourse" to renegotiate the relationship of transess to impairment (Marshall 235). Thom accomplishes this by completely decentering the cisgender and binary narratives which determine binary and cisgender identities as normal or standard.

One way in which Thom challenges the standards for beginnings set by the medicalists and the traditional transgender memoir is in her portrayal of childhood. While the opening of the story is markedly melancholy, the narrator is not alone. The narrator expresses a close mentor-like relationship with her little sister Charity and a complicated relationship with her parents. She identifies hope–her own and that of her immigrant parents–against the bleak backdrop of Gloom as the thing that "strangles" (8). Rather than convince the readers of an idyllic childhood or express any interests in behaving or dressing "like a girl" Thom fluidly addresses her boyhood that existed alongside a girlhood in Gloom. Thom continues this deviation from the traditional transgender memoir by advising the readers to focus on losing themselves rather than finding themselves. The narrator argues, "sometimes, to become somebody else, you have to become nobody first. You have to let go…" (21). This advice is in direct conflict with that of Christine

Jorgensen and Jan Morris who argued that transitioning was about coming into a true self and aligning the body with the mental gender.

Thom also rejects ideological purity by refusing to demonize sex work and violence for the sake of survival. Much of *Fierce Femmes* is dedicated to describing a period of time where Thom's narrator joins a transgender girl gang formed with the intention of exacting revenge for the murder of numerous transgender women and lack of police intervention. When law enforcement takes notice of the violence being conducted against wealthy and influential cisgender men they conduct a sting operation. As the narrator flees the scene, she slips into fantasy and describes the street changing shape "helping, helping [her] get away" (109). The narrator almost escapes but then must kill a police officer in order to prevent him from killing Thom's least favorite member of the girl gang, Lucretia (116). This officer, Tyler Rosen, returns to the narrator in the form of a zombie throughout the remaining portion of the story prompting fears that convince the narrator that she is the actual monster in the story. This violent scene and its repercussions add another dimension to Thom's narrator and works to solidify her status as a 'dangerous' trans girl. The rejection of ideological purity allows the trans* narrative to utilize themes of both violence and monstrosity in a reclamatory way. These themes, while present and useful in Thom's work, take on a primary level of importance in the speculative fiction subgenre of trans* horror and trans* apocalyptic writing discussed in chapter three.

Chapter Three: Theory Applied to the Trans* Speculative Novel

A Theoretical Framework for Monstrosity

Monstrosity serves as one of the most prominent topical throughlines for trans* theory and literary history. Framed briefly in chapter one using the concept of the vampire and explored further in chapter two when examining the transgressive qualities of Thom's *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars: A Dangerous Trans Girl's Confabulous Memoir*, the concept of monstrosity has long been used to harm queer communities and has recently been used as a means of reclaiming power and expressing queer or trans rage. Trans* speculative fiction presents itself as the ideal genre to explore the application of a trans-ed monster theory.

In her essay "The Village and the Woods," Thom explores monstrosity by examining the way the fear of the unknown drives communities to ostracize and dehumanize those who they perceive as a threat. In this model, the village represents law and order while the woods represents uncertainty and chaos. The residents of the village each serve a role to uphold the village's system. The priest is the leader who has much to gain by taking a stance against monsters and further fostering the fear of the people. The villagers themselves can be subcategorized further into victims, witches, and enforcers, or viewed collectively as a mob.

Thom's explanation of the monster itself is fascinating because the monster exists only as a relational concept. Without the town and villagers there is no meaningful concept of monstrosity. Thom highlights the embodiment of monsters as fraught with moral judgements; "the demonic, the beastly, the evil, the disgusting and reviled" monsters represent "wildness, freedom and danger" which the world outside rigid institutions offers (19). The villagers in this model hate because they fear the danger that the monster represents.

In addition to the influence of this fear response, the monster archetype is considered "wholly unsympathetic" because of the perception of monstrosity as "infectious" (19). One example of this is modern, anti-queer rhetoric that considers queerness a social virus to which children are particularly vulnerable. Thom also notes that those in the villager role perceive the monster as having "a skin of shame and sinfulness that leaks and threatens to corrupt and pervade all who come near" and that because of this pervasiveness "sympathy for the Monster is a sin" (19). This concept is further explored later in the chapter when analyzing the ideological extremism present in both *Manhunt* by Gretchen Felker-Martin and *Hell Followed With Us* by Joseph Andrew White. The monster's status is dependent on the "perception of guilt" rather than any actual guilt, and all forms of violence against the monster are completely sanctioned (19). This violence can look like ostracization, verbal degradation, or state-sanctioned physical harm.

This menagerie of violence fuels the cycle that keeps the village afraid and the monsters in-human in the eyes of the villagers. Using a modern political example, Thom asks scholars and activists to consider "how intensely the trauma and vulnerability of cisgender girls is emphasized while the trauma and vulnerability of transgender girls is most often neglected entirely" because of the casting of transgender girls as monstrous (22). This linking of trans identity to monstrosity renders trans* individuals symbolic rather than fully human and again highlights past and current cultural fears as the force that sustains the relational image of the transgender monster.

Monstrosity is also tied to trans* identity because of the many cultures that locate personhood in an unwavering and readable gender expression. In "My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage," Stryker argues that having a cognizable gender "makes one's personhood cognizable" (147). To then reject this declared gender, a person must reconceptualize and reconstruct the self in a manner that is

external to the societal messaging that person has received since birth. Stryker also draws connections between trans monstrosity and the act of defying nature through the medical and scientific creation of a new form. She regards with skepticism the representation of the trans* body as "an unnatural body… flesh torn apart and sewn together again in a shape other than that in which it was born" (134). This Frankenstein-esque description casts the trans* person as a body being acted upon by medical science. Stryker argues that this is a very surface-level understanding which completely omits the trans* consciousness that is "no more the creation of science… than the monster's mind is the creation of Frankenstein" (139). The modification of the trans* body relies on techniques which Stryker considers to be "inseparable from the pursuit of immortality through the perfection of the body… the hubristic desire to create life itself" as well as "a deeply conservative attempt to stabilize gendered identity in service of the naturalized heterosexual order" (139). Many trans* individuals defy this order and broader culture expectations. As explored in chapter one's section on power, this form of "consciousness articulating itself" risks revealing "the constructedness of the natural order" (147). The concept of trans personhood then becomes a powerful disruptor which must be silenced.

In order to reassert dominance and authority, hegemonic institutions in power must undercut the sanity of the trans* individual and the trans* community at large. Stryker notes that, "through the filter of this official pathologization" the trans* voice can be "dismissed as the confused ranting of a diseased mind" (141). When anti-trans* rhetoric of this kind is followed to the highest degree, it relegates trans* individuals to a sub or non-human status. Like monsters, trans* individuals are perceived as "less than fully human due to the means of [their] embodiment" (134). In the case of trans exclusionary radical feminists, the trans* body is

considered to be so offensive that the likes of Mary Daly and Janice Raymond would ask, as Doctor Frankenstein did, for a complete eradication of the offending party.

Applying these concepts to literature, Sharp identifies an overarching representation of trans* monstrosity and gender variance which "positions trans people as subhuman, either the perpetrators of monstrous violence or the grotesque products of a misguided science" (175). This representation permeates literature because of the tendency for monsters to serve as both boundaries for acceptable behavior and an embodiment of a culture's fears. However, Sharp argues, "… [the] reworking of transness in relation to monstrosity also shows gender variant people as uniquely positioned to imagine how we build futures safe from monstrous violence" (181). A reworking challenges the cultural belief that transness is equivalent to monstrosity and rather locates transgender individuals as more likely to be the victims of violence. Reframing can be accomplished by rejecting the idea of a "natural body" and connecting transgender identity to larger non-human living systems (183). By subverting the monster, trans authors have the opportunity to critique and combat violence against "global gender variant communities" and violence against the planet itself" (183). This concept is particularly relevant in the context of the sub-genre of trans* apocalyptic fiction where damage to human communities is often intersected by stark changes to ecosystems or the broader global environment.

Trans* Adaptation and Reclamation of Monster Theory

Rather than completely rejecting the concept of trans* as monstrous, Stryker identifies a way forward which allows trans* authors and activists to reclaim the title of monster. She identifies the rage felt by Frankenstein's monster and compares it to a kind of queer rage experienced in the face of dehumanizing violence comparing the monster's "enmity to the human race" with the trans* person's opposition to those who would universally condemn the

trans* identity and experience (135). This rage serves as a form of protection against violent anti-trans rhetoric. Stryker argues that "primary rage [rooted in dehumanization] becomes specifically transgender rage when the inability to foreclose the subject occurs through a failure to satisfy norms of gendered embodiment" (145). She also notes: "Transgender rage is a queer fury, an emotional response to conditions in which it becomes imperative to take up, for the sake of one's own continued survival as a subject, a set of practices that precipitates one's exclusion from a naturalized order of existence that seeks to maintain itself as the only possible basis for being a subject" (146). Once paired with transgender rage, trans* monstrosity is given a qualifier that exists outside the bounds of societal perspective. Because of this frame shift, there is also a shift in potential for power.

A focus on trans* rage also provides context for Stryker's plea for trans* people to reclaim the words monster, creature, and unnatural just as the word queer has been reclaimed. She muses that the ultimate horror of Frankenstein's monster is that the creature has a "life and will of its own" (Stryker 138). This mirrors a sentiment prevalent in anti-trans rhetoric. This reconstruction of the concept of trans* monstrosity allows individuals to "move beneath" the stylus of creation in order to achieve "deep self-sustaining pleasures" and a sense of fulfillment in the face of dehumanization (147). Stryker, considering Frankenstein's monster, notes that "like that creature, I assert my worth as a monster in spite of the conditions my monstrosity requires me to face" (147). This assertion of self-worth also serves to combat and subvert dehumanization and "redefine a life worth living" (147). In addition to the practical function the subversion of dehumanization serves, it creates an excellent foundation for a trans-ed, or Trans as Method, conception of monster theory.

The Impact of Setting

As Thom explores the genesis of the monster in her work "The Village and the Woods," it becomes clear the monster is largely shaped by the setting. The woods help the village better construct monstrosity because the shadows and darkness allow room for a manipulation of pre-existing fears. Novelists Gretchen Felker-Martin and Andrew Joseph White use apocalyptic settings as both inciting violence and sustaining pressure which renders previously unseen forms of monstrosity visible.

Felker-Martin's *Manhunt* focuses on a post-apocalyptic world ravaged by cisgender men who develop a zombie-like virus due to their levels of testosterone. In this novel, transgender individuals Beth, Fran, and Robbie must navigate their own personal fears and evade a militant group of Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminists. In *Manhunt,* monstrosity intersects with themes of queer solidarity, sexual violence, transgender experience, social binary, and survival. Although *Hell Followed With Us* by White shares in Felker-Martin's post-apocalyptic approach, as a young adult novel its focus is the surviving youth of the world. This novel centers the character Benji, a young transgender man who has escaped from a fundamentalist Christian cult. This cult, known colloquially as The Angels, is responsible for creating an apocalyptic virus which has wiped out a significant portion of humanity. The tension of this story lies in Benji's inability to battle the bioweapon with which the cult has infected him. Monstrosity here intersects with themes including queer rage and resistance, dysphoria, religious oppression, community, and survival.

In Felker-Martin's *Manhunt* and White's *Hell Followed With Us* it is important to understand the influence of the environment in which each story takes place. Both novels can be considered trans* speculative fiction but more specifically are works of trans* apocalyptic

horror. Each novel's conception of monstrosity is informed by the religious and political systems the characters interact with.

In Felker-Martin's debut novel *Manhunt*, she explores the way religion and divinity intersect with trans apocalypse by weaving in prayers and symbols from Christian, Hindu, and Jewish characters. Each prayer to God speaks to the life of the character before the apocalypse. Fran muses over whether or not she will make a "convincing" woman as her cousin Aaron reads prayers from the Haggadah (100). Beth, who utters a much shorter prayer, asks for safety from her stepdad begging "Dear Jesus, please kill Steve" (100). Robbie's 'prayer' encapsulates a revival scene where the preacher lays hands on Robbie in order to "throw the devil out" (101). During this interlude, Robbie repeats the phrase "Make me a man, Lord" as a mantra (102). Indi, a Hindu character notes of the post-apocalyptic society "this is Durga's world. We're just living in it" (137). Later Hindu imagery of the elephant is used to signify a brief moment of peace before disaster: "The elephant seemed to watch them for a time, so huge she felt like something out of a dream or like a god come down to earth to walk among the mortals she had shaped from clay" (246). In each of these instances religious imagery is used to signal the struggle between hope and hopelessness. In the case of Fran, Beth, and Robbie this is a hope tied to their youth and trans* identity while Indi's reflections are used to highlight the hopelessness of the current reality.

In *Hell Followed With Us*, White explores the intersections of environmental and Christian fascism in a post-apocalyptic setting. For this reason, his use of religion is much more connected to the protagonist's self-concept and the framing of trans* monstrosity. His protagonist, a sixteen-year-old boy named Benji, struggles against an eco-fascist evangelical group who call themselves The Angels. Having been raised by The Angels, Benji notes his

ability to "recite the Book of Revelation from memory" (White 62). The movement's biblical literalist roots are exemplified by the monstrous violence enacted for the sake of bringing about the second coming of Jesus Christ.

White also infuses biblical scriptures into the novel's structure in order to frame Benji as a child fully immersed in religious dogma. Benji's choice to return to The Angels' stronghold in order to infiltrate and destroy them is presented alongside a biblical passage from the Book of Esther: "And so will I go unto the king… and if I perish, I perish" (White 305). Upon Benji's arrival home and reconnection with his mother, a prominent leader within The Angels biblical scripture is again used to frame Benji's experiences. Reverend Mother Woodside's reaction to his return is internally criticized by Benji quoting a portion from the book of the prophet Isaiah: "A mother shouldn't be gentle when seeing her missing child for the first time in weeks… *Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb*?" (309). White frames Benji's own internal monologue as structured around biblical scripture and teachings of The Angels in a way that highlights the all-encompassing nature of the Angel's requirements for belief and Benji's own deconstruction process.

Another form of environmental influence which births monstrosity, the political reality of *Manhunt*'s world helps readers better understand the intensity of trans exclusionary and separatist rhetoric as well as intersectional identity's impact on lived reality. Beth and several of the other non-passing trans women note the absurdity of many of the behaviors that have carried over into the post-apocalyptic world. Beth is critical of the "middle-class brain disease that makes people think calamities can be controlled" (Felker-Martin 24). She also notes with fear the "women who stayed silent" when facing the extremist army's expansion in New England (73). This fear of apathy in the face of monstrous violence is paired with a fear of the violence itself.

While Felker-Martin chooses to focus her attention on the social realities of the New Womyn's Republic, White discusses the broader political climate which led The Angels to take control of America. The novel opens with the image of flowers blooming in the Pennsylvania winter. Benji notes, "Flowers bloom in February. It's one of the few good months for flowers. They'll die of thirst by April" (3). The severe impact of climate change on the environment enabled the rhetoric of the Angels to gain traction as their official categorization is an "Evangelical eco-fascist" terrorist group (21). On a day which the movement termed Judgement Day, named after an event in the biblical book of Revelation, they released a bioweapon designed to kill the majority of humanity. A journal entry from one of the Angel's states, *"Watch [the world] empty. Watch it return to the paradise our Lord intended*" (151). At various points, White uses Benji's own perceptions of the world around him to emphasize the way the extreme reduction of the human population has impacted the natural world. Looking above the dark city around him, Benji notes "The Milky Way shines in a silver streak above the buildings and clouds…" while relating the scene to the biblical book of Revelations the Angels so often reference (122). Benji argues that "the first heaven and the first earth were murdered" when considering a portion of scripture that predicts the first heaven and first earth will "pass away" (122). This highlights the tension between Benji's own perceptions of the world around him and his evangelical and eco-fascist community of origin.

Paths to Monstrosity

Stryker notes the broad meanings of the word monster's Latin roots. The noun *monstrum* is based upon the verb *monere* which, inspired by the ancient sphynx, means "to warn" (137). Trans* identity also resembles a sphynx because of its many composite parts which work together to form a new identity. Monsters are also harbingers of the supernatural and "heralds of

the extraordinary" (137). Similar to the angels of Abrahamic religions, they bear the message: "Pay attention; something of profound importance is happening" (137). Trans* identity has mirrored many cultural shifts and, as discussed in chapter one of this work, has been associated with divinity, power, and taboo.

Men as Monsters

The most literal monsters present in *Manhunt* are the people who have been infected with estrophaga virus. This virus targets people with high levels of testosterone and turns them into viscous no-longer-human creatures always "looking for something to rape, maim, and leave half-dead" (6). The character Indi gives insight regarding the physical appearance of the creatures as she works with Sophie's boyfriend who has been long turned. She notes, *"I wish that it had changed their eyes*, thought Indi. *I wish they didn't look at you like that"* (207). In addition to noting the human-ness of the eyes, Indi recounts the strange skin and the long black tongue of the creature.

Another physical component of these creatures is the hormonal synthesis that happens in their modified endocrine system. The creatures' bodies retain a high level of estrogen in the adrenal glands and testicles (4). It is for this reason that Fran and Beth hunt men and harvest their organs. Beth notes that she feels sorry for the creatures who were once men but that "maybe they were happy now, free to rape and kill and eat whomever, free to shit and piss and jerk off in the street" and argues that "maybe this world was the one they'd always wanted" (25). Beth's perspective transfers some of the responsibility away from the current monsters and onto the men of society past. Her perspective identifies a cultural dimension to monstrosity and seems to answer the questions "what was holding the monster at bay before?" and "how much of the monstrosity now expressed was sanctioned or forbidden by Patriarchy in the world before?"

Because of the virus's reliance on the hormone testosterone, trans men, trans women, nonbinary people, and those with PCOS are all also at risk. As Fran laments over her inability to have her facial plastic surgery before the apocalypse, she also concedes that she probably would not have lived due to the fact that she would have stopped taking estrogen for a period surrounding the surgery. She nervously notes "If I ever run out of spiro and E I'll be one of them a few weeks later" (6). Fran and Beth later reflect on the trans woman who "turned" at St. Vincent's hospital further highlighting the impact of the virus on trans women (36). Robbie is jokingly described as the last man on earth because he was able to evade the virus while he was still on testosterone. He outlines the rarity of trans men and his own desire for solitude and safety (33).

Trans Characters as Monsters*

Gretchen Felker-Martin weaves Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminist (TERF) ideology into her novel in a way that exposes the various ways in which TERFs portray trans* individuals as monstrous. Teach's opening speech about the New Womyn's Commonwealth leans heavily on separatist feminist ideology (72). This opening is very mild and focuses more on women's liberation. As the novel progresses, more and more transphobic ideology is folded into Teach's speeches and conversations. The movement itself enacts violence against trans characters by portraying them as dangerous and subhuman. The executions of three trans people, the last being Feather, Ramona's lover, are detailed as the women are called by their deadnames, read their offenses, and shot: "Jason Cohen, One count rape by omission of biological sex, one count preserving a known vector for the estrophaga virus, thirteen counts of aiding and abetting in the preservation of such vectors. Last words?" (188). Teach also refers to a group of trans women as "...a hive of male prostitutes in womanface" (190). Upon being confronted by Robbie at Fort

Dyke, Teach notes of the trans man: “It wasn’t a man. It was a dirty little brainwashed traitor, one of those pitiful women conned into abandoning her gender to grasp the straws the patriarch dangled just out of her reach. Sawed into, T-poisoned, and spiritually mutilated” (285). Teach then yells slurs at Robbie once he has injured her calling him “Fucking traitor… Fucking faggot piece of shit!” and threatening “I’ll kill you! I’ll kill you!” (286). At this point Teach has descended into a blind rage.

As she dies, her mind is on the trans people she so hates: “the thing her husband David and his brothers had kicked half to death behind the little bar in Arlington” and “her selfish faggot brother” (286). This obsession highlights a relationship akin to Thom’s priest-monster connection in “The Village and the Woods” where an individual becomes so obsessed with unmasking the monster that it supersedes all other desires. Even as Teach dies, her focus does not leave the hate she feels towards the monsters she has created in her mind. She is unable to see her own violence as monstrous and has been completely consumed by and—from her perspective—martyred for the cause.

Inversely to this downward spiral of obsession, Felker-Martin uses Ramona’s inverted progression to highlight something akin to, but not quite, a redemption arc. She starts with an exceptionalist attitude toward Feather, the trans prostitute she sleeps with stating “they weren’t *really* a tranny, not in the dangerous way” (77). When she leaves Feather’s home a second time she stares “at the women–the things–on the staircase and looking down at her over the banisters;” this differentiates Feather from the other trans sex workers and reveals Ramona’s prejudices (166). Ramona enacts very real violence against trans women during the first two thirds of the book. This violence culminates in a moment where she orders a firing squad on a group of trans women and says to the soldiers aiming their guns “that’s not a woman. It’s not

your sister" and then receives her 'wings' and promotion to the higher ranks of the New Womyn's Army (110). A series of interludes throughout the second portion of the novel reveal her doubts regarding the army's ideology, but it is not until the final chapters of the book that she chooses to defy Teach and defend the trans community at Fort Dyke.

Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminists as Monsters

The victimization of trans* individuals in *Manhunt* serves to highlight the violence and monstrosity of the New Womyn's Commonwealth and trans exclusionary radical feminism. Beth notes how frequently she, Fran, and other trans women must "[rely] on strangers to do something other than torture and exploit them" (217-8). This is because of the extreme violence this new society directs towards trans women. She argues that this new society will continue to kill trans people "*until it's just the Cisterhood… finding reasons to accuse each other of masculine-coded behavior. They'll win and they won't even like it*" (255). Fran's own dying thoughts reiterate this point as she watches the New Womyn's Army argue viciously among themselves during their attack on Fort Dyke: "*They don't even love each other… They're men… They're just men*" (284). This stark comparison highlights the violence that Fran and Beth have experienced at the hands of the monsters who were once men as well as at the hands of the New Womyn's Army.

This assertion of the army's monstrosity is further supported by Teach's new definition of feminine power that she shares with the other TERFs as they attack Fort Dyke: "People always think of the divine feminine as nurturing… A big soft mommy cow to be raped and bred. But our foremothers bit through their own umbilical cords. They smothered their deformed infants. They killed the wounded on the battlefield. The screams of childbed, the hot blood of the menstrual flow–those things are the goddess" (275). The concept of this army becoming men speaks to the overwhelmingly violent nature of the movement.

Monstrosity is portrayed using various forms of physical violence, including sexual violence. While Beth is raped by a man when a pack of them attack her and Fran (50), the other forms of sexual violence are perpetrated by cisgender women against trans women. While Teach's opening speech states "no longer will we sell our flesh… No longer will we be forced into whoring" much of the sexual violence enacted against trans women in this novel is due to forced prostitution (72). Beth is forced into sex work at the Screw and must "[sit] alone on the edge of the bed until her soul [comes] back into her body" after each encounter where she is forced to play a male role (144). In fact, Beth actually notes her preference for the sex work she did before the apocalypse with men because it was less physically and emotionally violent for her (144).

Fran, the other prominent transfeminine character in this novel, is also sexually assaulted multiple times. Initially, Fran has consensual sex with Sophie: "She drank from Sophie. Greedy mouth on fluttering lips. The dream of a cunt growing like a seedling in strange soil," but then she is pressured into further sexual acts by Sophie who states "I just really need something inside me, you know? I never feel done until…" (153). This pressure, in combination with the molly Sophie has already given her, persuades Fran to consider sexual acts with which she is uncomfortable as "a price she could pay" (153). Later, a TERF named Viv forces Fran's pants open and gropes her before threatening to kill her when she discovers that Fran has a penis (210). The third and final sexual assault happens when Fran must convince Ramona to remain silent about the group at Fort Dyke's plans for fighting the New Womyn's Army. Fran notes of the encounter "I let her do it… I thought if I didn't she might turn us in… It wasn't that bad" (247). This act further cements the New Womyn's Army as a monstrous entity equal in impact to the monsters who were once men.

Religious Messaging as a Monster

In *Hell Followed With Us*, the use of religion and religious messaging as monstrous is complex and multifaceted. Faith, a young ex-coast guard soldier Benji befriends at the Acheson LGBTQ+ Center, questions her own beliefs wondering if she will have to "deal with believing in the same kind of God [The Angels] do" (White 55). This fear voiced by Faith is further exemplified by Benji's own actions, observations, and internal monologue throughout the novel.

Fear and conflicting messages regarding belief are highlighted by visceral and violent imagery. One example of this is the juxtaposition of the bright banners and painted messages from the Angels with decaying and brutalized bodies of victimized 'non-believers' that are littered throughout Acheson. The first banner bearing the message "GOD LOVES YOU" is paired with "corpses dangl[ing] from the wires, yellow-pink organs hanging from their stomachs to obscure their nakedness, like Adam and Eve ashamed of their bodies" (4). Drawing comparison to the plagues of Egypt, Benji notes bodies alongside "the mark of wings painted on every door in the same shade of red as blood, like the blood on the doors of the Israelites to spare their firstborn sons" and the reiteration of the message "GOD LOVES YOU, GOD LOVES YOU" alongside the sinister words "PREPARE TO DIE, HIS KINGDOM IS NEAR" (133). Contrasting these messages which defer to a biblical framework, the messages from the Angels regarding repentance are "screamed" by the letters (14). In both cases the corpses amplify rather than contrast the message presented by the written words.

In the first instance, Benji observes a corpse that "hangs from a flagpole" and "massive letters on the building behind it scream[ing] REPENT SINNER" (14). The second instance of this screaming text escalates from the first instance with multiple "bodies of nonbelievers hang[ing] in various stages of rot" with "giant letters scream[ing] GOD LOVES YOU, REPENT

SINNERS, THE TIME HAS COME. TRUST IN THE LORD AND YOU WILL BE SAVED" (306). The use of the term nonbelievers includes all people who have not "given themselves to God in the exact way The Angels demand it" (53). These people include non-Angel protestants and Catholics in addition to adherents of other religions and atheists. The Angels consider only two fates to be appropriate for nonbelievers. In addition to killing nonbelievers, The Angels transform the nonbelievers' bodies into monsters they call Graces, using their bioweapon named The Flood.

The Grace as a Monster

The Graces are the first type of literal monster to be introduced in *Hell Followed With Us.* A Grace is described as being "a creature made of corpses and the Flood" with "sharpened ribs lining its back in a row of spines, eyeballs blinking between sinew, muscles so swollen they split the skin—rises from the wreckage" (6). This bioweapon created out of death and disease is described by Benji in terms of physical adaptations such as spines and "claws the size of arm bones" (6). While Benji initially describes the Graces with animal-like qualities, the Angels consider them to be a testament to God's divine mercy. One Angel states, "Isn't it amazing…, this new life they've been given? How merciful of our Lord to allow them to be born again, to become warriors in our fight for His plan. Just like you" (15). The language "born again" directly ties these creatures to the evangelical christian concept of afterlife and salvation.

The Seraph as a Monster

The second literal monster in *Hell Followed With Us* is Seraph, the creature Benji is becoming because of the Dominion serum he was given by The Angels. As with the Graces, each character or group offers a different perspective regarding what Seraph truly represents for this post-apocalyptic world.

For Benji, Seraph represents monstrosity in the form of lost autonomy. He jokingly remarks, “I won’t have to deal with [dysphoria] for much longer. My skin is only a temporary thing” (127). He also seriously challenges The Angel’s expectations of sexual purity as he finds it ironic to be “...shamed for giving up [his] body before marriage. As if [he] hadn’t been forced to give up [his] body to something far, far worse” (171). Benji’s description of his transformation into the monster is visceral and hallmarked by pain:

> My body is too big for itself. My limbs are long, like they’ve been stretched on a rack, bending in places they shouldn’t and packed with muscle and tumors. Painful barbs jut from my shoulders and the curve of my wings, right where little spikes grow into feathers. I press my face against the tiles and gasp for air. (337-8)

These elements connect to the previous animal-like descriptions of the Graces and highlight Benji’s connection with the creatures as his transformation into monster progresses.

This transformation brings emotional changes to Benji alongside the physical ones. Benji begins to experience extreme bouts of rage that he categorizes as “*Seraph* burn” (114). Benji considers this anger to stem from the emotion he never allowed himself to have as a little girl and finds it comfortable in spite of its damaging nature. As Benji questions his own desires and behaviors, Nick asks him, “Are you a monster because you’re an Angel… or because you’re Seraph?” (63). This question forces Benji to consider his own conflicted perceptions of his past identity of Angel and his future identity of Seraph.

Nick considers Seraph to be completely inhuman, and this dictates his initial interactions with Benji. Nick refers to Benji as an “it” and argues that “Seraph isn’t a person” (105). He also struggles to differentiate between himself and the violent acts he committed as an Angel Death Squad soldier. Benji reminds Nick that he didn’t want to view him as a person because that

would mean questioning his own humanity and monstrosity. Even as this perspective evolves, Nick struggles to navigate the idea of the Benji and Seraph existing in the same body. As the transformation process progresses Nick notes the monster makes Benji "not look much like Benji at all" (262). The radical transformation is highlighted by Benji's own descriptions of his changing and degrading body.

The Angels regard Seraph as a means to gain power. Theo, Benji's ex-fiancé, almost fetishizes the breakdown of Benji's body. Seraph represents a power that Theo craves more than he values Benji's safety or comfort. When Benji returns to The Angel's stronghold, Theo "pulls [Benji's shirt] down and presses a kiss to the side of [his] neck, right where the rot has started to reach" (White 323). Rather than having a negative reaction to the decay, Theo almost seems more attracted to Benji when viewing him as a vessel for Seraph rather than as a full person.

Intimate Partner Violence as a Monster

Another theme that White uses to capture monstrosity is intimate partner violence. Benji's complex feelings toward his former fiancé are colored by Theo's history of violent and explosive behavior. These emotions are first explored when Benji begins to feel attracted to Nick after fleeing the Angels. Benji tells himself, "Theo promised to fight beside me. We were perfect together. To think like this about anyone else is wrong. No matter what Theo did to me that night" (38). The event isn't fully described at first, but the reader is still given the impression that violence has tinged the relationship. Later Benji reasons, "I told him I was afraid of Seraph, and he hurt me for it, and I'm still in love with him, I still love him, I still, I still–" highlighting the role the aforementioned monster Seraph plays in the relationship (144). When Benji is briefly reunited with Theo in the city he tells himself, "He won't hurt me this time" (153). The inciting violence is not revealed until Theo has pressured Benji into a sexual encounter. He panics

thinking, “I don’t like the way he’s holding me. I remember him wrenching my wrist so hard I screamed for him to let go, he was hurting me, he was going to break something” (214). Benji recalls the violence he experiences at the hands of Theo in interludes. These moments are often paired with monstrous images of Seraph.

Trans Survival’s Intersection with Monstrosity

Benji’s own identity as a transgender boy is connected to monstrosity in the viciousness of his fight for survival. Benji refuses to willingly give The Angels their monstrous bioweapon and repeats the mantra “*If they want their monster, make them suffer for it*” (White 20). Benji rejects the idea that he must bend to the Angel’s will and asks himself “what kind of monster do I want to be?” (207). He frames this choice alongside the nature of his own identity stating, “My boyhood threatened to destroy me unless I looked it in the eye. I’m not going to let Seraph do that to me too” (165). His reclamation of bodily autonomy as a trans person and a survivor of The Angels’ brutal medical experimentation directly challenges the type of social control Seraph is supposed to represent.

Community, Identity, and Survival

As the beginning of this chapter noted, the relationship between environment and the genesis of the monster, the closing focuses on the relationship between monstrosity and the broader environment, particularly themes of community, identity, and survival. The representation of the trans community in *Manhunt* is expressed through ‘T4T’ relationships also called brick for brick. This play on words highlights the constructive nature of the dynamics. Beth notes that she “felt sisterhood” at Fort Dyke in a way that she had never experienced before (Felker-Martin 233). It is the monstrous violence Beth experiences alongside these women that prompts her to realize “in some way she would never unravel, in some strange and hazy

confluence of gentleness and violence and self-mortification, Beth was more a woman than she'd ever been" (283). When Mariana comments that she and her sister did everything together and "she wishes they'd died together, too" after her sister is killed, Beth muses that "*community is when you never let go of each other. Not even after you're gone*" (256). This sentiment is furthered upon Fran's death as Indi talks to Fran as she prepares her body for burial (291) and Beth uses Anne Carson's "If Not, Winter; Fragments of Sappho" to say goodbye to Fran after placing her body in a grave by the fort (293).

While Felker-Martin emphasizes the sense of community and sisterhood present among the trans women, she outlines the breakdown of community among the ranks of the New Womyn Commonwealth and TERFs globally. J. K. Rowling's death is compared to "real *Masque of the Red Death* shit" when one of her friends with PCOS catches the virus and goes on a rampage killing all of the women in the Scottish castle they've sought shelter in (229). Immediately after Mariana shares the pain she felt losing a woman she considers her sister, the perspective shifts to a public execution where Ramona degrades another soldier stating that the woman "sold out her sisters for a degenerate subspecies of autogynephiles…Men who take sexual pleasure in stealing our bodies. In wearing our skin" (257). This stark contrast highlights the ideology's damaging cruelty.

Considering community and identity, Andrew Joseph White notes, "*Hell Followed With Us* is a book about survival. It is a book about queer kids at the end of the world trying to live long enough to grow up. It is a book about the terrible things that people do in the name of belief and privilege" (VII). This fierce notion of community is echoed through the love and loss experienced by the community of queer teenagers throughout this work. This sense of deep and abiding love takes on a symbolic religious meaning when Trevor, a member of the Acheson

LGBTQ+ Center, dies on a mission. At Trevor's funeral Erin states, "He died for us because he loved us" (74). The wording of this statement echoes The Angels' perception of Jesus Christ and of their own martyrdom. The novel and *Manhunt* end with a sense of established home as a group rather than a place. Although the Acheson LGBTQ+ Center has been destroyed in a fire and Benji has lost all of his biological family and community of origin, he is totally content. He states, "This is home. I am alive, these are my friends, this is my *family*. Wherever the Watch is, I'm home" (398). This, although a more hopeful reflection than Beth's recitation of "If Not, Winter; Fragments of Sappho," serves a similar purpose by avoiding the hero's-journey-home ending discussed and by allowing trans* rage and monstrosity to nurture a stubborn and relentless hope for the future.

Conclusion: Looking Ahead

Conceptualizing a trans* literary history using the figure of the hourglass, one can trace many paths. The themes of divinity, monstrosity, power, and performance each offer a unique entry point into the rhizomatic nature of queer storytelling across time and culture, while the renaissance of the western medical model of transgender identity during the Victorian period made visible, and diagnosable, the trans* experience. Transgender identity framed as variant or deficient has largely influenced the representation of trans* characters in literature and broader media. Approaching a post-medical conceptualization of trans* identity, authors such as Kai Cheng Thom must grapple with the natural tension that exists between the traditional transgender coming out narrative–often presented in the form of memoir–and trans artistic expression that often aligns more closely with post-modern and queer work.

Although I gave particular attention to apocalyptic horror, other subgenres within speculative fiction offer storylines that lend themselves to trans-coding, performativity, and common trans* themes such as (dis)identity and queer rage. Particularly genres which include societal integration of artificial intelligence and cyborg technologies speak to the question of what it means to inhabit a body. Monstrosity, as mentioned throughout this work, will likely always lend itself to trans* storytelling because of the long and brutal history of gender and gender identity based violence faced by the trans* community.

Gretchen Felker-Martin and Andrew Joseph White both speak to specific cultural moments and use literature as a means of addressing and critiquing hegemonic societal structures. Perhaps one day attitudes towards trans* youth will so shift that the genre of trans* literature will lose its power or more closely resemble historical fiction. Until then, as hostile

political action continues to target the queer community, trans* literature and the application of the trans* lens will continue to negotiate the boundaries of trans* visibility, agency, and power.

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