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*Lived Experience and Literature: Trans Authors, Trans Fiction and Trans Theory*

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**Lived Experience and Literature:  
Trans Authors, Trans Fiction and Trans Theory**

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of  
Sheffield Hallam University  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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## **Abstract**

The primary aim of this thesis is to investigate the complex relationship between contemporary trans rights discourses and contemporary trans fiction by trans authors with a critical framework informed by scholarship in the field of trans theory. Trans theory cannot exist separately from lived experience, and I argue that trans authored texts are the written equivalent of lived experience. I state that trans theory is uniquely positioned to consider the impact of theoretical concerns on subjective experience and the ways in which seemingly disparate communities may be linked through shared oppression. In showing that trans theory may be thematically applied to trans texts, this thesis provides the basis for a framework of trans literary analysis that may be applied to all texts. The analysis is presented thematically, covering the topics of essentialism, passing, representation and violence. Each theme is discussed theoretically and then used to analyse two trans authored fiction texts. In order to provide my analysis, I have used and modified Judith Butler's work on cultural intelligibility and viability (1990, 2008), and Johanne Galtung's work on types of violence (1969, 1998) as lenses for analysis to better account for the specific ways in which societies have an impact on trans lived experience and oppression. An objective of this thesis is to highlight the importance of trans narratives in society and how their analysis is beneficial both theoretically and socially. My main contributions to knowledge within this thesis are twofold: I create a paradigm for the development of trans theory as a method of literary criticism; and I apply this to the previously under acknowledged genre of trans fiction.

# Table of Contents

<b>Abstract</b> .....	<b>2</b>
<b>Table of Contents</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	<b>7</b>
<b>Candidate’s Statement</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>9</b>
<b>0.1 Aims, Scope and Questions</b> .....	<b>9</b>
<b>0.2 Terminology</b> .....	<b>11</b>
<b>0.3 Theoretical Context</b> .....	<b>17</b>
0.3.1 – Feminism .....	18
0.3.2 – Queer Theory.....	20
0.3.3 – Trans Theory.....	22
<b>0.4 Methodology: Theory and Activism</b> .....	<b>28</b>
<b>0.5 Choice of Texts: Trans Fiction</b> .....	<b>34</b>
<b>0.6 Structure of Thesis</b> .....	<b>41</b>
<b>Chapter 1: Essentialism and Anti-Essentialism</b> .....	<b>49</b>
<b>1: Introduction</b> .....	<b>49</b>
<b>1.1: Essentialism</b> .....	<b>57</b>
1.1.1: Cis context .....	58
1.1.2: Trans context.....	62
<b>1.2: Anti-Essentialism</b> .....	<b>66</b>
1.2.1: Cis context .....	66
1.2.2: Trans context.....	71
<b>1.3: <i>Tiny Pieces of Skull</i></b> .....	<b>74</b>
<b>1.4: <i>Refuse</i></b> .....	<b>87</b>
<b>1.5: Coda</b> .....	<b>103</b>
<b>Chapter 2: <i>Passing: The Single Story Narrative</i></b> .....	<b>105</b>
<b>2: Introduction</b> .....	<b>105</b>
<b>2.1: Reasons for Passing and their Impact</b> .....	<b>110</b>
<b>2.2: Reasons for Not Passing and their Impact</b> .....	<b>115</b>
<b>2.3: <i>Stone Butch Blues</i></b> .....	<b>118</b>
<b>2.4: <i>Transition to Murder</i></b> .....	<b>130</b>
<b>2.5: Coda</b> .....	<b>145</b>
<b>Chapter 3: <i>Community, Representation and Visibility</i></b> .....	<b>147</b>
<b>3: Introduction</b> .....	<b>147</b>
<b>3.1: Community</b> .....	<b>152</b>
<b>3.2: Representation and Visibility</b> .....	<b>158</b>
<b>3.3: <i>Roving Pack</i></b> .....	<b>168</b>

3.4: <i>Otros Valles</i> .....	181
3.5: Coda .....	194
<b>Chapter 4: Society and Violence .....</b>	<b>196</b>
4: Introduction.....	196
4.1: Identity violence .....	200
4.2: Physical Violence.....	208
4.3: <i>Nevada</i> .....	213
4.4: <i>First Spring Grass Fire</i> .....	226
4.5: Coda .....	235
<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>238</b>
5: Summary .....	238
5.1: Essentialism .....	239
5.2: Passing.....	240
5.3: Representation and Community.....	240
5.4: Violence .....	241
5.5: Limitations and Future Recommendations .....	242
5.6: Final Conclusions.....	243
<b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>245</b>

There's power in naming yourself, in proclaiming to the world that this is who you are. Wielding this power is often a difficult step for many transgender people because it's also a very visible one.

- Janet Mock (2014, p.144)

**For those whose stories have not been told.**

They tried to bury us. They didn't know we were seeds.

-Mexican proverb

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## **Candidate's Statement**

I, Emma Hutson confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

# Introduction

## 0.1 Aims, Scope and Questions

Trans theory has hitherto largely been used within sociological, medical and legal contexts and employed as a critical framework to ‘reevaluate prior understandings of gender, sex, sexuality, embodiment, and identity [...] from critical perspectives informed by and in dialogue with transgender practices and knowledge formations’ (Stryker and Aizura, 2013, p.3). This reevaluation is based on the foregrounding of lived experience, and as such is based on subjective knowledge and personal narratives. For this reason, trans authors are, I argue, especially well placed to offer articulations of such narratives in a way that does not ‘abstrac[t] and theoris[e] in ways that do not materially benefit’ trans people (Stryker and Aizura, 2013, p.5). Whilst trans theory may be applied to all texts that engage with embodiment and self-definition, in this thesis I will focus on an area which has been neglected: trans fiction authored by trans people.

Cisgender authors have historically received more critical attention and acclaim for trans themed texts. Angela Carter’s *The Passion of New Eve* (1977), Jeffrey Eugenides’ *Middlesex* (2002), Rose Tremain’s *Sacred Country* (1992) and Kathleen Winter’s *Annabel* (2010) have been studied by academics such as Rachel Carroll (2011, 2012, 2018) and Emma Parker (2007) offering a welcome reframing of these cis authored texts, expanding on previous feminist frameworks. However, key trans authored texts like Imogen Binnie’s *Nevada* (2013) and Roz Kaveney’s *Tiny Pieces of Skull* (2015), have not received such attention. Leslie Feinberg’s 1993 novel *Stone Butch Blues* is one of the only trans authored novels to have been substantially studied (see Prosser, 1998; Crawley, 2002; Enzer, 2015). In addition to this, the majority of academic output regarding trans texts has been focussed on life writing, for example, Jay Prosser’s work on Jan Morris (1998) and Emily Skidmore’s discussion of Christine Jorgensen (2011). Analysis of trans fiction has instead largely been through the anecdotal online accounts of individualised readings. This thesis addresses this gap in scholarship in analysing the work of a neglected group of authors and in investigating the complex relationship

between trans theory and trans authorship with a consideration of how they engage with trans advocacy discourses. Trans theory provides both the tools and the vocabulary to comprehend trans advocacy and theoretical contexts within trans fiction. Furthermore, literary criticism provides a way of discussing how these narratives are structured not only to be entertaining, but also to act as a form of didactic activism. Therefore, in this thesis I will investigate the complex relationship between contemporary trans rights discourses and contemporary fiction by trans authors within a critical framework informed by scholarship in the field of trans studies.

In the last three decades, trans studies and trans theory have accumulated a variety of intellectual and scholarly studies. Some, like David Valentine's *Imagining Transgender* (2007), have considered the construction and development of the category of "transgender", whereas others, such as works by Susan Stryker (2006, 2008, 2013) and Stephen Whittle (2000, 2006), have collated and analysed the social and legal history of trans issues. In this thesis, I use this vibrant body of scholarly work alongside a range of advocacy sources to consider why trans fiction is important; why it should be studied; and what we can gain from using trans theory to analyse fiction. Further, I will argue that the use of theoretical and activist sources are equally important in the development of trans literary studies. In order to do this, I use the critical frameworks afforded by both trans theory and literary criticism to provide an analysis of my chosen texts. I will do so in order to establish how the characters in the text exist within their respective society; whether parallels may be drawn to contemporary Western society, and the potential impact of these pieces of fiction on trans representation and lived experience.

I will consider, for example, how trans and cis characters are represented, and if and how the text's narrative arcs relate to the protagonists' transness. I will establish key themes within the genre of trans fiction, as it will be defined below, and consider if and how these themes intersect with the lived experience of trans people as it is captured on the page. I navigate the relationship between trans fiction, trans theory and trans activism. This work is both timely and important as trans fiction has not been sufficiently analysed or taken into account by either trans theory or literary studies,

even though fiction is crucial in the fight for the greater and more complex representation and visibility of trans lives. Fundamentally, then, in this thesis I bring together trans activism and trans theory to provide an analysis of trans fiction, offering a thematic trans literary analysis of previously neglected texts.

## **0.2 Terminology**

Due to the often complex and still evolving nature of terminology featured in trans theory and culture I will give a brief overview here of the most used terms. More specific terminology is defined in the chapter in which it is used. I have chosen to use 'trans' as an overarching descriptor because, whilst both 'trans' and 'transgender' have commonly been used as umbrella terms, 'transgender' has historically been associated more specifically with non-operative trans individuals who live 'full time' in the gender not assigned to them at birth. With the growing momentum of movement towards the acceptance of more fluid gender identities, the rigidity of these terms is rapidly becoming outdated. 'Trans', therefore, acts as a more inclusive and general term without any specific associations to a particular identity in the wider trans community. 'Trans' itself is a post-90s term that Holiday Simmons and Fresh! White described as 'short' for 'transgender and gender non-conforming people' (in Erickson-Schroth, 2014, p.3). It is used as an all-encompassing term under the 'trans umbrella' which covers a multitude of identities that fall outside of cisgender. These include but are not limited to, transsexual, transgender, agender, bigender, genderqueer, non-binary, trans masculine and trans feminine identities (see Namaste, 2000; Stryker and Whittle, 2006; Stryker 2008). Joseph Bristow attributes the broad range of trans 'labels' to 'dynamic mid- and late twentieth-century struggles to emancipate anti-normative sexual desires and gender identities from legal, medical and moral oppression' (in Knellwolf and Norris, 2008, p.217). Some definitions of what is included under the trans umbrella include identities such as intersex, drag king and queen, and transvestite and cross-dresser. However, some of these terms are more controversial. Intersex, for example, is a medically-defined status based on non-normative genital, gonadal chromosomal alignments; and drag, transvestite or cross-dresser identities are problematic in this paradigm because they are for performance, sexual pleasure, or part-time, rather than being everyday lived realities. However, trans theory's dedication to inclusion and self-

definition means that if a person identifies as trans, their identification as such is to be respected. In this thesis I have only included novels and theory about those trans identities that are lived every day; this is because I am focussing on lived experience as a key aspect of my analysis. Such lived experience is understood and experienced very differently by those who cross-dress or do drag, and for those medically diagnosed as intersex who face a wealth of specific medico-legal and social complications (see Koyama and Weasel, 2002; Roen, 2004; Grabham, 2007).

'Trans' is often described in opposition to the term 'cisgender', a neologism 'based on the Latin root "cis-", which prefixes things that stay put or do not change property' (Enke, 2012, p.60). Although etymologically 'cisgender' and 'transgender' are both equally descriptive of the perception of a particular state of being, the use of the word 'cisgender' has been declared an insult by some cisgender people. Enke, in her work on the concept of 'cisgender', describes this as being because naming 'non-trans' people in the same way that trans people have been named 'decentralise[s] the dominant group, exposing it as merely one possible alternative rather than the "norm" against which trans people are defined' (Enke, 2012, p.64-65). This posits that some cisgender people perceive being declared 'cisgender' as insulting because they are accustomed to their 'normative', and therefore 'unlabelled', status. Labelling has historically been considered a way of marking the 'other' as different. Whilst such labelling has been used politically to build communities, the idea of an unlabelled 'default norm' is still one that persists. Describing a similar concept, Salvador Vidal-Ortiz speaks of race, noting, 'while it is tempting to see whiteness as skin colour, whiteness is a structuring and structured form of power that, through its operations, crystallizes inequality while enforcing its own invisibility' (Vidal-Ortiz, 2014, p.264). Being 'invisible' in this case means being *unlabelled*, and revealing the inherent constructs behind this means contesting the power of those considered to be 'the norm'. In the same way, 'trans studies also revealed the unmarked position of the gender normative: the group once called non-transsexual people is referred to now as cisgender people' (Vidal-Ortiz, 2014, p.265). It is generally the case that 'it is people who are not transgender who object to the word', because, as 'TransGriot blogger, Monica Roberts notes, it is 'transgender (i.e. stigmatised minority) people [that] dare to name and *other* them' (Enke, 2012, p.61-62). B. Aultman concurs with this supposition and describes how and

why the term emerged from activism. It should be noted that they use an asterisk in their writing of 'trans\*' to indicate a breadth of inclusion, which is something that will be discussed anon. When describing the emergence of 'cisgender', Aultman notes that:

Cisgender emerged from trans\* activist discourses in the 1990s that criticized many commonplace ways of describing sex and gender. The terms man and woman, left unmarked, tend to normalize cisness—reinforcing the unstated “naturalness” of being cisgender. Thus using the identifications of “cis man” or “cis woman,” alongside the usage of “transman” and “transwoman,” resists that norm reproduction and the marginalization of trans\* people that such norms effect (Aultman, 2014, p.61-62)

In this way, 'cisgender' became 'the name of normative privilege' and using the term 'challenge[s] the naturalisation of “woman” and “man” by making visible their rootedness in the interested achievement of social hierarchies' (Enke, 2012, p.64). The term also helps to illustrate a conceptual difference between activist and academic contemplations of the same topic. In academic circles, the term 'cisgender' 'appears to encourage an investment in a gender stability that undermines feminist, trans\*, queer and related movements' (Enke, 2012, p.61) because, as Enke explains:

Just when queer and trans theory remind us that gender and sex have no *a priori* stability (one is not born a woman), cisgender arrives to affirm not only that it is possible for one to *stay* “a woman” but also that one *is* “born a woman” after all (Enke, 2012, p.63).

However, the way in which the term cisgender is actually used in everyday conversation is more reflective of the previous definition, as a way to denigrate the transphobic and cisnormative affirmation that cisgender is the norm against which trans is judged. In this thesis I use 'cisgender' in the activist sense. Further, although I consider the theoretical constructions of sex, gender and identity throughout this thesis, I above all foreground the everyday lived experience of trans people and, therefore, how terminology is deployed in trans communities.

It is important to note that the terminology used in trans culture and theory is still evolving and as such there is still a precedent for different people, theorists and community groups to use it in different ways. Stephen Whittle, in *The Transgender Debate* (2000), states as an issue of importance that:

the trans person, whether transsexual, transgender or transvestite is not seeking to change his or her gender identity [...] [w]hat trans people are trying to do is find a way of presenting their gender identity in such a way that the rest of the world will understand who they are (p.3).

As such, the term that each individual uses to identify as is usually, but not always, a reference to how they have chosen to embody this sense of self. For example, traditionally, 'transsexual' has been the word used to describe those individuals who elect to have both hormone therapy and gender confirmation surgery in order to change their physical sex to match their expressed gender (Whittle, 2000, p.11-14). Transsexuality as an identity has therefore been heavily medicalised and 'connected to psychiatric notions such as gender dysphoria' (Bettcher, 2009). The term 'transgender', as mentioned previously, is generally used to refer to those who decide against surgery, although they may take hormones to help cultivate secondary sex characteristics such as facial hair, deepening voice or breast development. As Bettcher states, transgender 'currently flags the political stance, especially in the Anglo United States, of resisting the pathologisation of trans people. This places it in prima facie opposition to the older notion of *transsexual*' (2009), although in recent years 'trans' has become more associated with such political standings. Language that implies a surgical status has the potential to be problematic, especially when considering the regular violence against trans people based on such differences in embodiment, something that I discuss in chapter 4. As Venus Selenite, poet and activist, notes, 'I believe we need to stop differentiating trans women, or trans people in general, as no-op, pre-op, and post-op', because '[i]f transition is obviously different for every trans person, then we need to do away with these terms' (Storify, 2017b). As such, the term 'trans', in its lack of specificity and its breadth of inclusion, acts to circumvent these potential issues.

The discussion of the most appropriate terms to describe the trans community as a whole was further developed in the second decade of the twenty-first century when 'trans\*', (where the asterisk acts to include any variation after the initial prefix), came into use 'more broadly to signify that there are numerous identities within transgender communities' (Simmons and White in Erickson-Schroth, 2014, p.5). Nash Jones describes trans\* as including all of the identities accepted under the trans prefix, but noting that it:

is also inclusive of identities that do not start with the prefix "trans," but can be understood as under the trans\* umbrella. These identities include, but are not limited to, genderqueer, bigender, third gender, genderf\*ck [...] gender fluid, genderless, MtF, FtM, Two Spirit, non-binary, androgynous, and masculine of center (MOC) (Jones, 2013).

Trans\* is a term that was quickly and widely adopted within academia. However, numerous trans bloggers have spoken out against the use of 'trans\*', protesting that it 'is overinclusive and can include cis crossdressers and gay cis drag queens/kings [...] cis people who do it for fun/sexual reasons are not trans and should never be considered trans, ever' (Kat, 2014). This makes clear some of the distinctions drawn between full-time and part-time gender expressions and subsequent lived experiences previously mentioned. There has also been concern regarding the development of the asterisk as it has been accredited to 'truscum<sup>1</sup> trans men [... who] begrudgingly let nb [non-binary] people call themselves trans, but with an asterisk. the [*sic*] asterisk was made to make nonbinary and gender-variant people feel "less trans"' (thenonbinaryspace, 2014). These objections to the term trans\* imply that there are varying levels of transness, some of which are more 'acceptable' than others. According to blogger Neirin, trans\* 'seems to be mostly superfluous at best and transmisogynist at worst and the fact that it has become such [a] prominent feature in discourse about gender when most of the people who use it don't actually know why they're using it is suspect to me' (2013). For the above reasons, I have chosen not to use the asterisk. My definition of trans, and

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<sup>1</sup> A term used within trans and activist spaces denoting individuals who believe that dysmorphia is fundamental to trans identification and that any trans person who does not experience it is illegitimate and/or appropriating trans experience.

the way that it is commonly used in trans theory, includes all those who would self-define as such, regardless of the specific terminology used.

The clash in opinions on the use of the asterisk highlights not only the importance of language, but also the significance of taking into account 'community language development', which K.J. Rawson and Cristan Williams discuss regarding the use of 'transgender' as an umbrella term (2014, p.2). The understanding that terminology within trans culture is developed and evolves within the community is one of the key reasons that there is a tension between trans culture and the academic world that must be acknowledged when structuring an analysis based on lived experience. The academic world has been criticised by 'non-academic bloggers' for over-simplifying a 'complex process of language development that includes emergences, passing uses, strong resistance, re-emergences, and clustered and regional adoption' (Rawson and Williams, 2014, p.2). I aim to overcome this by foregrounding trans voices and lived experience and by acknowledging the complexity and oppositions that exist within such a diverse community.

The broadening of terminology referring to trans identities does not mean that such identities are new, but rather that people's abilities to define themselves outside of the binary constraints of male and female, or even cisgender and trans, are evolving. Nataf describes the trans community's 'diversity and inclusiveness', as being accredited to the fact that trans individuals no longer need to 'contort their identity to fit into yet another narrow and oppressive category' (1996, p.15), at least in trans community spaces. Activist and author Leslie Feinberg stated that the 'glue that cements these diverse communities together is the defence of the right of each individual to *define themselves*' (1996, p.xi, my emphasis). Although it may appear that the breadth of inclusion within the trans community may lead to an indefinable politics with few shared perspectives, academic and blogger Natalie Reed has instead described the trans umbrella in terms of a political coalition (2012). In this coalition it is understood that many of the identities acknowledged within the term 'trans' have little in common, but that '[s]uch political coalitions are useful and meaningful not on the basis of shared identity or shared etiology of identity, but on the basis of shared *oppression*' (Reed, 2012), and it is this shared oppression that is one root of the development of

trans theory.

### **0.3 Theoretical Context**

Trans theory, then, is a theoretical framework that has its roots in gender studies, medical discourse, sociology and law. As a distinctive category in and of itself, trans politics and studies initially 'emerged in the early 1990s and this emergence is intertwined with feminist as well as queer theory and politics' (Bettcher, 2009). As it developed further it led to '[t]ransgender theory' being recognised as a 'theoretical orientation on the nature of gender and gender identity in understanding the lived experiences of transgender and transsexual individuals', it integrates 'embodiment with the self and socially constructed aspects of identity through the lived experiences of those with intersecting identities' (Nagoshi and Brzuzy, 2010, p.431). Whilst it is theoretically valuable for feminist criticism to approach gender from a poststructuralist position, tension arises when trying to consider trans identities, as so much of trans experience, and therefore trans theory and politics, is based in embodied lived experience. Trans theory and politics conceive of both essentialist and anti-essentialist understandings of gender, which therefore allow them to do something that feminism and queer theory do not. The new scholarship allows trans people to articulate their experience within society outside of medical discourse. It is this shift in perception that has allowed trans people to 'reclaim the reality of their bodies' (Stryker and Whittle, 2006, p.xii). The necessity of a trans-specific theory evolved from the need for a position that explicitly included all non-cisgender gender identities, focussed on the needs and experiences of all trans people and maintaining an emphasis on self-identification. Trans theory and politics propose a foregrounding of the diversity of trans experience and highlights the failure of cis-normative culture to adequately understand identities outside of the essentialist binary. In order to highlight the importance of trans theory and the necessity of its development from feminist and queer theories, I will give a brief summary of the ways in which it related to and evolved from each theory to provide a crucial perspective on the intricacies and intersections of gender, identity and embodiment.

### 0.3.1 – Feminism

The binary nature of Western society's understanding of gender is well established and the sex/gender dichotomy has been an integral part of feminist debate for generations, epitomised in the works of Simone de Beauvoir, Monique Wittig and Judith Butler, to name a few. The separation of sex and gender, and the ways in which they related to various forms of oppression, were not only crucial to the articulation of feminist theory and politics, but they also subsequently made it possible for trans theory to develop. However, the relationship between the two has not always been easy. As Talia Bettcher states, '[m]any of the earliest non-trans feminist perspectives on transsexuals were marked by hostility' (Bettcher, 2009), something that was often framed by essentialist politics. Whilst it was useful for feminism to utilise essentialist thinking during the second wave to demarcate 'woman' as a category worthy of political and economic equality, and to do the same in the third wave with anti-essentialist thinking engaging with post-structuralism in order to defy restrictive gender norms, these have since both been used to deny trans people their genders (see chapter 1). Although 'feminist studies and transgender studies are intimately connected to one another in their endeavour to analyse epistemologies and practices that produce gender', the everyday reality is that they are 'far from integrated' and that 'transgender remains institutionally marginal to gender and women's studies' (Enke, 2012, p.1-2). It must be noted that there are some schools of feminist thought that are wholly supportive of trans people and that work towards a politics of inclusion and intersectionality. However, there are other sections that are loudly opposed to trans women being included in the movement, and it is unfortunately the case that these factions gain the most press, something that has also been noted by Sally Hines (2019).

Sexual difference has been a powerful feminist tool for fighting for women's rights. However, trans simultaneously 'suggests that the divide of sexual difference can indeed be bridged or, alternatively, can be a limit to the very idea of sexual difference' (Salamon, 2010, p.163), and because of this, trans became 'one of feminist and queer theory's most contentiously debated issues' (Salamon, 2010. p.163). Letting go of previous conceptions of sexual difference has been difficult for some. As Emi Koyama has noted:

Every time a group of women previously silenced begins to speak out, other feminists are challenged to rethink their idea of whom they represent and what they stand for. While this process sometimes leads to a painful realisation of our own biases and internalised oppressions as feminists, it eventually benefits the movement by widening out perspective and constituency (Koyama in Dicker and Piepmeier, 2003, p.244)

Moving towards a more intersectional feminism that actively includes women of colour, women with disabilities and trans women in its praxis has been the work of many scholars and activists (See Crenshaw, 1989; Enke, 2012; Erickson-Schroth, 2014; Mallette and Runswick-Cole, 2014). Whilst for some sections of the feminist community, this has been unproblematic, for others there has been tension. In 1976, radical feminist Janice Raymond published *The Transsexual Empire*, a text in which she argues for a biologically essentialist understanding of womanhood and argues against trans women's right to identify as women. I discuss this text in more detail in chapter 1, but it is worth noting here that the legacy of this work has had an extended impact on some feminist theorisations and understandings of trans identity. Much of Sally Hines' work (2005, 2014, 2019) has focused on the interaction between feminism and trans issues and she has noted that 'despite links being forged between many sections of feminist and trans communities, there is a strong branch of anti-transgender sentiment running through contemporary feminist discourse' (Hines, 2019, p.154). As in all movements, there is a range of voices, not all of which agree, but fundamentally '[f]eminism is about a better set of values in which gender loses some of its power of oppression', which, as Whittle goes on to note, is 'what we who are trans can gain from [feminism] – but perhaps much more importantly now, is also something we can give back to them' (Whittle in Stryker and Whittle, 2006 , p.202). Given the complex and often divisive relationship between feminist theory and trans issues, one clear stance cannot be attributed to feminism, and, as a result, there is no clear space within feminism in which trans issues may be unproblematically ensconced. This is one of the reasons that trans theory needs to exist in its own right and why it developed outside of existing gender-based theories such as feminism.

### 0.3.2 – Queer Theory

Likewise, the poststructuralist iteration of feminism led to the development of queer theory, with Judith Butler's work often heralded as the bridge between the two. Since then, due to being embedded within the LGBT movement, trans issues have often been considered within queer theory. This has been problematic because the poststructuralist politics of the theory, its disavowal of binaries and its desire for the destabilisation of norms, has led to trans identities being exemplified as a means by which to challenge the boundaries of sex, gender and sexuality. Because queer theory typically only embraces the anti-essentialist aspects of trans identity and fails to account for essentialist perspectives, it is often inadequate for the study of trans issues and identities because it is limited in its acceptance of the full variety of trans narratives and accounts for only those aspects of trans identity that call into question the sex and gender binaries. Stryker notes that:

'While queer studies remains the most hospitable place to undertake transgender work, all too often *queer* remains a code word for "gay" or "lesbian," and all too often transgender phenomena are misapprehended through a lens that privileges sexual orientation and sexual identity as the primary means of differing from heteronormativity [...] Most disturbingly, "transgender" increasingly functions as the site in which to contain all gender trouble, thereby helping secure both homosexuality and heterosexuality as stable and normative categories of personhood' (Stryker, 2004, p.214)

What this indicates is that, in being located at the border of social viability, trans identities have enabled the homosexual identities that previously occupied that space to move closer to the centre, and as such, closer to what is considered to be 'the norm'. As boundary crossers who operate within a space of mixed genders and sexualities, trans figures 'become the lever for the queer movement to loosen the fixity of gender identities enough to enable affiliation and identification between gay men and lesbians' (Prosser, 1998, p.5). In the context of queer theory, the process of transition is used to show the constructed nature of sex and gender rather than as the

method by which a person's authentic<sup>2</sup> identity is realised, which can be problematic within certain trans communities as I discuss in chapter 1.

Sally Hines has also discussed queer theory's engagement with, and appropriation of, trans identity, stating that, '[q]ueer theory in particular has utilised the concept of difference to incorporate transgender into analyses of sexual and gender diversity', in doing so, this 'lack of emphasis upon particularity within queer theory has led to a homogenous theorisation of transgender' (2006, p.49). This theoretical lack of 'particularity' serves to exacerbate an already troublesome issue within cisnormative culture in which only one narrative of trans identity is acknowledged. This is an issue that underpins many of the choices I have made in this thesis. Fundamental to the aim of trans theory is the desire for trans people to be treated equally and fairly in society, something that can only be achieved when they are acknowledged as culturally viable<sup>3</sup>, and I would argue, culturally valuable. As long as society acknowledges only one narrative of trans existence, it will be impossible for trans people to be equal in society. This limited number of acceptable narratives of trans existence may be seen in various ways, the most insidious of which is the requirement that in order to gain gender confirmation surgery, trans people must first 'narrativise the embodiment of [their] condition, to tell a coherent story of transsexual experience, [for] the doctors before their authentication of the subject's transition' (Prosser, 1998, p.9). I would argue that this can lead to researched and rehearsed normative trans narratives being given instead of authentic embodied experiences. This is a theme to which I will return later in this thesis. This undoubtedly affects the official medical narratives of trans identity and experience; these in turn influence other academic work on the subject, therefore having a significant snowball effect on the ways in which trans people are understood and treated within society. Additionally, after surgery, in a practice 'unique to the treatment for gender dysphoria', trans individuals may be asked to write a 'new personal history: a fictive account of childhood and life before transition, rewritten for the new gender' (Nataf, 1996, p.21), thus denying their trans history and erasing their

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<sup>2</sup> 'Authentic' and 'authenticity' are used in this thesis to refer to self-defined identities and/or lived experience-based perspectives.

<sup>3</sup> Cultural viability refers to how 'livable' a person's life is based on their culture's norms and treatment of them. It will be defined and discussed at greater depth in chapter 2.

transness. This silencing of authentic trans perspectives and lived experiences has led to a hegemonic stereotyping of trans identities. In the consciousness of gender non-conforming existence, 'the stereotypes and bi-polar gender itself is being challenged, the need to pass is being challenged, and the need to create lies about one's past and one's status as transgendered becomes less compelling' (Nataf, 1996, p.42). This relates to Sandy Stone's suggestion of a 'posttranssexual' identity, one that forgoes the need for passing and embraces the *entirety* of a person's trans history (Stone in Epstein and Straub, 1991). However, importantly, trans theory also accounts for those who do identify within the binary and choose never to disclose their trans past. The limiting of narratives of trans existence to a particular repeated story that conforms to expectations that were set by medical and psychological professionals as a way of gatekeeping transition and subsequently became the formative cultural narrative of transition (this is discussed in more depth in chapter 2 regarding passing and the 'single story narrative' of trans existence within society).

### **0.3.3 – Trans Theory**

Both feminist and queer articulations of trans issues have failed to account for the embodiment and lived experience of all trans people. Instead, such articulations have used trans people and identities as exemplars of the anti-essentialist or performative nature of gender, or, as a way in which to lessen the impact of gender separatism in the queer movement. Gayle Salamon 'suggest[s] that feminism [...] has not been able to keep pace with non-normative genders as they are thought, embodied, and lived' (Salamon, 2010, p.6). Similarly, David Valentine has noted that although '[q]ueer theory, and activism organised by this term, arose at almost the same moment as "transgender" in the 1990s', it has not 'been institutionalised in the same ways or the same contexts that "transgender" has outside the academy' (Valentine, 2007, p.24-25). Therefore, these movements alone fail to address the complexity and multiplicity of trans identities and experiences. They minimise how different experiences of different queer identities affect people's lives; they eradicate hierarchies within the queer movement itself and ignore how oppression may occur within the community; and, they neutralise the potential subversion of some enactments of 'traditional' gender roles may also be subversive. Fundamentally, then, they fail to adequately consider how lived experience and personal embodiment are represented. This is what

trans theory aims to rectify, not least by focussing on lived experience, embodiment and acceptance of the full diversity of non-cisgender identities. Nagoshi, Nagoshi and Brzuzy describe how trans theory developed, noting that it was:

a response to the limitations of feminist and queer theories in understanding transgenderism. The key elements of transgender theory that differentiate it from feminist and queer theories include the fluidity of gender and sexual identity, the importance of embodiment as a source of identity, and the importance of lived experience as the means for negotiating fluidly embodied identities (2014, p.11).

Whilst it is undoubtedly the case that the first element – the fluidity of gender – was made possible by poststructuralist feminism and then by queer theory's advancement of social constructivist thinking. The second element – on lived experience – likely evolved from feminism's stance that 'the personal is political'. The third element, in which the first two are brought together, is wholly the realm of trans theory and politics. Trans theory has used and built upon its roots in feminism and queer theory to further develop critical thinking in a way that explicitly considers trans identities and experience in a way that the others fail to do. It is this last element, 'the importance of lived experience as the means for negotiating fluidly embodied identities' (Nagoshi, Nagoshi and Brzuzy, 2014, p.11) that is the primary foundation for the analyses within my thesis. Given feminist and queer theory are sometimes at odds with trans issues, it stands to reason that trans theory, above feminism and queer theory, is the most useful and appropriate theory for the aims of this thesis.

It should by now be clear that a trans-specific theory is necessary outside of queer theory and feminist discourses as it accounts for the ways in which intersectional approaches privilege impact on trans lived experience. It has been noted that 'the emergence of transgender theory from feminist and queer theories [used] social constructivist approaches to challenge essentialist ideas that maintained the oppression of certain gender and sexual identities' (Nagoshi and Brzuzy, 2010, p.431). Trans theory actively moves away from the prevalence of the medicalisation and pathologisation of trans identities. Stryker and Whittle note that, '[i]n the 1990s a new

scholarship, informed by community activism, started from the premise that to be trans was not to have a mental or medical disorder' (2006, p.xii). Drawing the understanding of trans experience back to the 'reality of [trans] bodies' has led to a theory in which 'sex and gender themselves no longer appear as stable external categories but rather appear embedded in the individuals who experience them' (Stryker and Whittle, 2006, p.xii). Such a stance embraces all gender identities and places each person as the authority on their own identity, removing defining authority from hegemonic power structures. The foregrounding of personal experience and expression is an important aspect of trans theory and politics, its inclusion of all non-cis identities means that it embraces all sides of any conflicting politics within the whole. This will be discussed in chapter 1 regarding essentialism and anti-essentialism, and in chapter 2 regarding the choice between passing and crossing.

Trans theory operates at the locus of gender production and gender dismantling; it embraces both essentialist and anti-essentialist, binary and non-binary, gendered and agender identities and as such accounts for and accepts any non-cisgender conceptions of gender. As Nagoshi, Nagoshi and Brzuzy state, it:

encompasses and transcends feminist and queer theory by explicitly incorporating ideas of the fluidly embodied, socially constructed, and self-constructed aspects of social identity, along with the dynamic interaction and integration of these aspects of identity within the narratives of lived experience (Nagoshi, Nagoshi and Brzuzy, 2014, p.1).

For this reason, trans theory is still establishing itself and is constantly evolving, but was 'first articulated as a distinct individual field in Sandy Stone's foundational "Posttranssexual Manifesto" published in 1991, which explored the 'restrictive category [of "transsexual"] that required gender-changing people to be silent about their personal histories as the price of their access to medical and legal procedures necessary for their own well-being' (Stryker and Currah, 2014, p.3). In this one paper we can see the foundations of some of the key themes of trans theory that my analysis of trans authored literary texts draws upon. Stone discusses visibility, essentialism, passing, trans narratives and medicalisation. I build upon Stone and expand her ideas

by actively considering the notion of danger. In the Manifesto, Stone calls for people to 'forgo passing' and give up their 'invisibility' (1991, p.298-299), but does not consider the potential effect this could have on the everyday realities of trans people's lives. She notes that 'silence can be an extremely high price to pay for acceptance' (Stone, 1991, p.299), but not the potential price of 'reading oneself aloud'. Danger is an important issue with which later trans theorists do somewhat engage. I further address this gap in the scholarship in chapter 4.

After Stone's foundational text, it is perhaps Jay Prosser's *Second Skins: the body narratives of transsexuality* (1998) that has been one of the most influential books in trans theory. Prosser's primary focus within this text is the transsexual narrative, 'stories of bodies in sex transition' (1998, p.4). His aim is to foreground the 'bodily matter of gender crossings' (Prosser, 1998, p.4) and therefore to move away from the sociocultural readings of sex and gender promulgated by scholars such as Judith Butler. Prosser's focus on the material reality of trans lives leads to a discussion of 'transsexual embodiment' that considers the location of identity and the role of surgery (Prosser, 1998, p.61-96). He asks: 'what is the status of the body for transsexuals? Does sex reassignment suggest the body as a surface in which the self is substantially invested or conversely the body's substance as superficial to the self?' (p.63).

Where the early work of Stone and Prosser considers the political and embodied nature of transsexualism, later work within trans theory foregrounds transgenderism, moving away from physical concerns and more towards the social. In 2007, David Valentine analyses 'the origins, meaning, and consequences of the emergence and institutionalisation of the category transgender' (Valentine, 2007, p.6). and considers how 'sites, places and people became comprehensible [sic.] to activists, social service providers, journalists, public policy makers, anthropologists, and others through the category transgender' (Valentine, 2007, p.14). Valentine examines the power of definitions within society, and in particular how they can lead to the creation of community against the odds. However, he also discusses the potential for this to create a homogenous understanding of what it means to be trans, a problematic outcome that echoes queer theory's conceptualisation of trans identities. Whilst Valentine's work usefully considers how the idea of 'transgender' gradually came to

exist and be used. Valentine's *Imagining Transgender*, an ethnographical work by a cisgender critic that focusses on a particular group of trans people in a particular location, does at times feel dated and external to the movement. For example, it considers how trans communities are built, but not necessarily their impact on those within them, something which I address in this thesis in chapter 3. However, it is undeniable that this work has enabled future considerations of community, representation and violence.

As previously mentioned, 'transsexual' and 'transgender' became united under the aegis of 'trans', which acted to bring together a wide range of identities and experiences, advocating for the acceptance and equality of each of them. Encompassing the diversity of trans theory's scope, Stryker and Whittle have defined trans studies as covering 'theories of sexed embodiment and subjective gender identity development' and describe it as being concerned with 'anything that disrupts, denaturalises, rearticulates, and makes visible normative linkages we generally assume to exist' between physical, social, cultural and personal aspects of 'gendered personhood' (2006, p.3). This diversity of inclusion has led to intersectionality becoming a key issue in trans theory as it enables an approach to 'trans discrimination [that may be viewed] as an interlocking system of oppression rather than as one solely based on gender' (Simmons and White in Erickson-Schroth, 2014, p.19). However, the approach to intersectionality in trans politics and theory also involves addressing the oppression that occurs in the movement itself. Kai Kohlsdorf notes in *Trans Bodies, Trans Selves* that '[e]arly trans studies came under fire for being US focussed and lacking racial analysis' (in Erickson-Schroth, 2014, p.84), whilst Kortney Ryan Ziegler and Niam Rasul note that '[t]rans people of colour often face discrimination or silencing within trans and LGBT communities' (in Erickson-Schroth, 2014, p.30). This silencing is something that Erickson-Schroth's text aims to rectify, with chapters dedicated to studying how different areas of identity, such as race, disability, religion, or immigration status, interact and intersect with the trans aspect of a person's identity, referring back to the privileging of lived experience in and by trans theory.

In keeping with this, Paisley Currah and Susan Stryker describe the field as being concerned with the 'full life content' of trans people, engaging with each aspect of

their identity and lived experience (2013, p.7). They go on to describe the theory as being invested in:

The accounts [trans people] offer of themselves and their world; their visions of the past and of futurity; their material histories and concrete social organisation; *the art they make and the literature they write*, their activist campaigns and political struggles; their health and illnesses; their spirituality and religious beliefs; their forms of community; their experience of the life cycle, of interpersonal relationships, of kinship, and of institutions; their erotic lives, inner lives, domestic lives, and working lives; the way they represent themselves and are represented by others (Stryker and Currah, 2014, p.7, my emphasis).

My thesis touches on many of these issues and engages methodologically with others. Literature, activism and theory are the cornerstones of this thesis and address the themes of lived experience, political struggles, community and representation – key categories that organise my analysis of literature within this thesis. I consider the art and literature of trans people to be fundamentally important to the endeavour for trans equality and, as I will discuss, believe that it has a crucial role to play in the humanisation and, by extension, acceptance of trans people in society. As Currah and Stryker state that:

Perhaps most importantly, the field encompasses the possibility that transgender people [...] can be subjects of knowledge as well as objects of knowledge. That is, they can articulate critical knowledge from embodied positions that would otherwise be rendered pathological, marginal, invisible, or unintelligible within dominant and normative organisations of power/knowledge (Stryker and Currah, 2014, p.9)

This statement echoes absolutely my motivation for foregrounding the work of trans theorists, activists and authors. Whilst it would have been possible to use cis-authored fiction within this thesis, it would have fundamentally lacked the 'embodied knowledge' and thus would have undermined the political potential of centring the

work of a subjugated minority. In line with this, Valentine states that there are:

three central features that characterise the emerging field of transgender studies: first, the capacity for new insights into embodied experience, second, the heterogeneity of theoretical positions, identification, embodiment, and disciplinary backgrounds [...]; and third, the importance of transgender identified scholars in providing these insights (Valentine, 2007, p.146).

Fundamentally, trans theory addresses issues of embodiment, self-definition and lived experience. It examines how trans people relate to sex and gender; how society receives trans people, how intersections of identity, such as age, race, sexuality, social class, and so on, affect trans lives. It considers how the trans community as a whole is represented and how different communities under the trans umbrella relate to one another. Whilst it was once the case that feminist and queer theoretical spaces were considered the most obvious space for trans issues to be considered, due to their interaction with sex and gender, it is now thought that those theoretical landscapes in which embodiment is at the forefront provides a more useful alliance. As Stryker notes:

transgender studies resonate with disability studies and intersex studies, two other critical enterprises that investigate atypical forms of embodiment and subjectivity that do not readily reduce to heteronormativity, yet that largely fall outside the analytic framework of sexual identity that so dominates queer theory (Stryker, 2004, p.214).

These issues are attended to through the thematic nature of my analysis by addressing the topics of embodiment, essentialism, violence and visibility.

#### **0.4 Methodology: Theory and Activism**

There is methodological precedent for combining the use of theory and activism in order to produce comprehensive analyses. This has most regularly been seen in those emerging fields that are focussed on oppressed identities. For example, Rebecca Mallett and Katherine Runswick-Cole discuss how, in the field of Disability Studies:

the relationship between the disabled people's movement and academic institutions [...] continue[s] to be "generally productive". "Nothing about us without us," (Charlton, 2000) is a famous slogan adopted by the disabled people's movement, and the involvement of people with personal experience of disability continues to be important within the discipline (Mallett and Runswick-Cole, 2014, p.8).

This foregrounding of subjectivity and inclusion is something that is both at the forefront of trans theory and this thesis; I actively and consciously foreground the work and voices of trans people. It was this desire that first prompted me to include activist and advocate sources as they provide diverse perspectives from within the trans community that are not mediated by academic and publishing gatekeeping. Furthermore, as is the case in Disability Studies, there is the 'inability of scholarship to keep up with the output of new cultural texts' (Mallett and Runswick-Cole, 2014, p.55), something that also applies to the rapidly growing field of trans studies.

Another critic who considers the linking of theory and activism to be a productive endeavour is Anne Enke, who notes that 'our ability to keep classrooms relevant depends on this [...] perspectival and practical exchange [...] And theorisations that take place in the classroom can provide sustaining energy to social concerns', however, she also recognises that '[a]cademic contexts – perhaps a bit slow on the uptake – can simplify, ossify, and discipline otherwise queer terminologies while authorising, legitimating, and institutionalising their use' (Enke, 2012, p.60). The implication is that the main transference of knowledge runs, or should run, from activism to theory, with only occasional, well-reasoned transmission in the opposite direction. I agree with this proposition and take it into explicit consideration within my own work. I consider theory to be best used as a reflective process in which ideas, issues and concerns of lived reality are considered in a methodical manner to better understand, with the benefit of hindsight, what happened and why.

Activist voices have been at the forefront of trans theory since its development in the 1990s, a time of several extremely influential nonfiction works that bring together the

personal, cultural and political aspects of being trans. Two of the best-known texts include *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us* by Kate Bornstein (1994), and *Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to RuPaul* by Leslie Feinberg (1996). Both texts blur the boundaries between autobiography and manifesto, with the authors using their own lived experiences to describe or critique sociocultural issues that affect trans people while arguing for the improved treatment of trans people in society. What each of these texts show is how activism and personal experience have always very much influenced trans theory.

Bornstein's *Gender Outlaw* is concerned with ideas of deconstructing gender and works to address many of the common misconceptions that surround trans identity. It is very much a piece of didactic writing that includes definitions pertaining to sex and gender (Bornstein, 1995, p.21-40) and begins to consider issues of 'gender, class, and power' (1995, p.107); issues that are fundamental to the intersectional nature of trans theory today. It also features several sections of question and answer style writing that address issues such as surgical transition (Bornstein, 1995, p.15-19, 113-140) and the 'wrong body' narrative (Bornstein, 1995, p.66). Bornstein uses her own life and experiences to bring together the wide range of issues she discusses within this text. For example, when answering the question '[w]hat's a transsexual?', alongside defining it as 'a medicalised phenomenon [...] invented by a doctor', there is a separate insert alongside it from a personal perspective:

I had my genital surgery partially as a result of cultural pressure: I couldn't be a "real woman" as long as I had my penis. Knowing what I know now, I'm real glad I had my surgery, and I'd do it again, just for the comfort I now feel with my constructed vagina. I **like** that thang! (Bornstein, 1995, p.119, bold in original)

Bringing together the critical and personal in this way is something that connects to the consideration of lived experience being crucial within trans theory and politics. Bornstein's work here balances the theoretical ideal of rejecting the 'system [...] perpetuated by doctors', and allowing people to be free of arbitrary notions of what is 'natural' (1995, p.119), and the lived reality that the 'demedicalisation of

transsexualism' would lead to, as it would 'further limit surgery [...], as it would remove the label of "illness" and so prohibit insurance companies from footing the bill' (ibid). Bornstein's mix of criticality, practicality and personal narrative here works to root her writing in lived experience in a way that some purely academic works do not.

*Transgender Warriors* (1996) by one of the most prominent trans activists, Leslie Feinberg, tracks the history of those who have lived beyond or between the sex/gender binary and begins to articulate why lived experience is a crucial aspect of trans theory's work. Feinberg notes:

Today a great deal of "gender theory" is abstracted from human experience. But if theory is not the crystallised resin of experience, it ceases to be a guide to action. I offer history, politics and theory that live and breathe because they are rooted in the experience of real people (1996, p.xiii).

Building this into their practice, Feinberg opens the text with a chronicling of their life and how they came to realise that they were trans. Moving through history and into the present during the text, Feinberg also comments on the politics of the trans movement and calls for 'a lasting coalition' between different elements of the LGBT spectrum in order to tackle the oppression each group faces (1996, p.98). Alongside providing a general history in which to situate trans identities, Feinberg also uses appendices to provide more practical information such as a break-down of the 'International Bill of Gender Rights' (1996, p.165-169); a list of 'transgender organisations' and their contact details (p.171-175); and a list of 'transgender publications', most of which are independently published magazines (p.177-179). Whereas the didacticism of Bornstein's text seems to be more aimed at a cis reader, (she answers questions she had commonly been asked by cis people about her identity), Feinberg's inclusion of functional information places the text as being specifically aimed at other trans people for the purpose of 'fashion[ing] history, politics, and theory into a steely weapon with which to defend a very oppressed segment of the population' by contextualising, historicising and humanising their identities (Feinberg, 1996, p.xii).

Much like Bornstein, Feinberg also cites the everyday realities of trans lives, using their own life to frame the discussion:

My life changed dramatically the moment I began working as a man. I was free of the day-in, day-out harassment that had pursued me. But I also lived in constant terror as a gender outlaw. What punishments would I face when I was discovered? (Feinberg, 1996, p.12)

This quotation alone encapsulates two crucial issues that trans theory considers: passing and violence, both of which I use within this thesis as key themes for analysis. They were also highlighted in Zachary Nataf's *Lesbians Talk Transgender* (1996), published in the same year as Feinberg's book, again highlighting how activism has always fed into trans theory. Akin to both Bornstein and Feinberg's texts, Nataf's work contextualises and positions trans identities as socially valid by situating them historically, linguistically and culturally. Having provided a brief Western history of trans identities, how they have existed in other cultures, and contemporary legal definitions and genetic theories (Nataf, 1996, p.9-16), Nataf moves on to considering more subjective concerns in which they merge their own discussion of each topic with comments from various contributors who identify as trans or lesbian. What this allows Nataf to do is provide a wide range of perspectives on trans identities and lesbian culture, something that is in keeping with the subject-focussed nature of trans theory. The short discussions of a broad range of topics provide a snapshot of the landscape of trans theory and lived experience, with the inclusion of contributor perspectives also providing an insight into the activism of a time when:

The major issues and campaigns of the transgender movement are: employment protection; being sent to the wrong sex prison; being unable to marry or adopt children; access to healthcare; legal status and changes of documents; action against transphobia and violence; action against defamation, discrimination and disinformation in the media; campaigning for inclusion in mainstream lesbian, gay and bisexual political agendas and human rights agendas; and, radically, working for the freeing of identity and the dismantling of the oppressive gender system (Nataf, 1996, p.27).

We are able to see here that Nataf's work closely aligns with both Stone's and Bornstein's in its discussion of the need for fundamental changes in how sex and gender are understood, and the steps necessary to implement practical changes to improve trans lived experience respectively. However, what also becomes clear is what has and has not changed in the last two decades. Many of the above issues are still at the forefront of trans theory and activism's work, and have subsequently influenced the work of this thesis.

When writing about social and legal change regarding the treatment of trans people, Dean Spade (2015) also discusses many of the issues previously mentioned by Nataf, but Spade also speaks to the relationship between theory and activism. From his stance as a lawyer, he discusses a number of ways in which legal battles for trans rights and anti-hate crime laws do not help the daily lived experience of trans people and is instead tokenistic 'proof' of legal process that act only to shore up the systems that punish trans people. I focus primarily on his discussion of the grassroots facets of 'critical trans politics' and the ethos being used by organisations that seek to help trans people in a practical way. He argues that:

We need a critical trans politics that perpetually questions its own effectiveness, that refuses to take for granted stories about what counts as change [...] We need a critical trans politics that is about practice and process rather than arrival at a singular point of "liberation" (Spade, 2015, p.2).

Activist sources are included in this thesis and to ensure that change happens from a grassroots level, rather than just an institutional one.

For these reasons, in this thesis I use Spade's description of 'critical trans politics' which he describes as 'emerging from membership-based organisations' which then feed directly into trans theory's criticality (Spade, 2015, p.108). This foregrounding of trans people's perspectives and needs and allowing those to feed the aims of trans theory is in keeping with the ways in which other identity-based theories have developed, (like Disability Studies). Spade notes that '[t]hese organisations share certain key principles

for structuring their work to be participatory and centred in racial and economic justice' (Spade, 2015, p.108). These principles include: '[e]nsuring that work is led by those most directly impacted'; '[u]sing an intersectional framework for understanding the multiple vectors of vulnerability converging in the harms members face'; and '[r]emaining process-oriented rather than end-oriented, practicing [sic.] ongoing critical reflection rather than assuming there is a moment of finishing or arriving', (Spade, 2015, p.109). Each of these principles are also at work in this thesis. I use novels, theoretical texts and activist sources produced by 'those most directly impacted' - trans authors, theorists and activists; I consider issues of intersectionality throughout, ensuring that I include the works and voices of a diverse range of people, and allow my reading to guide my analyses. To ensure that the 'work is led by those most directly impacted', I have organised this thesis around the themes that appear most frequently in both trans fiction and trans theory. These are: identity and society, transphobia, passing, and finding community. Each of my chapters deals with a different aspect of these themes in order to discuss how trans theory may be used to provide a considered and sustained analysis of trans authored fiction.

### **0.5 Choice of Texts: Trans Fiction**

I have chosen to use fictional texts written by trans authors because, as I will argue in chapter 3, the increased visibility and representation of oppressed people has the power to humanise them in society. This in turn acts as a foundation from which to oppose their oppression. As I mentioned in the opening to this introduction, fiction written both about and *by* trans people has been somewhat neglected in academia, which is something I will address in this thesis. I believe that it is important to consider authorship explicitly in this case due to the prevalent lack of understanding of the complex realities of trans existence, and trans authors are able to address this in a way that is currently not possible for the vast majority of cis authors at this point in time. As I will discuss now, the term 'trans fiction' has some implications for authorship, but also for theme and audience.

The following discussion helps to narrow the specifics of what is meant by 'trans fiction'. Katharine Cross emphasises the 'truth' of trans lives as being key, Cheryl

Morgan and Casey Plett highlight authorship as crucial, and Trish Salah foregrounds the expression of values as vital. What all of these definitions do, however, is aim to move trans narratives away from the reductive nature of repetitive stereotyping and as such highlight the diversity of trans characters. As such, within the parameters of this thesis, I define trans fiction as that which is written by, for and about trans people based on, and featuring, the diverse subjective lived experience of being trans. The genre is therefore inherently political, in that it is defined by author identity and experience.

Due to its still emerging nature, the definition of trans fiction is highly nuanced and does not yet have a standard classification. Because of this I will draw together several descriptions of the genre to synthesise a definition that may be suitably deployed within my thesis. As recently as 2010, Cheryl Morgan questioned whether there was such a genre, noting that '[t]here are a number of trans people who have successful careers as writers, but mostly they don't write about trans issues' (Morgan, 2010) which she describes as being due to the need to reach wide readerships in order to make a profit. The implication here is that fiction *by* trans authors and fiction *about* trans characters are separate entities, and that authorship is not enough to define a text as being 'trans fiction'. Furthermore, Morgan suggests that writing *about* trans issues is valued less, both politically and commercially, than texts about ostensibly cisgender characters.

It should be noted that not all trans writing has been so disregarded, a genre in which trans people have traditionally been allowed a voice is auto/biography. Talia Bettcher described it as being historically 'the [only] vehicle by which transsexuals wrote about their own experiences' (2009). This is problematic because '[i]n autobiography we appear as singular beings [...] often as curiosities, outliers among humankind, who confirm the normalcy of the non-trans reader' (Salah in Page, n.d.). Autobiography, then, rather than being a way for trans individuals to articulate their lived experiences becomes a way for cisnormative society to further the othering of trans people. It is not specifically the genre of life writing that is problematic in this context, but rather the restriction of trans writing to that genre and the subsequent impact of this on the way that trans people are perceived in society. This restriction is one of the key reasons that I have chosen to include only trans fiction within this thesis, rather than the

broader scope of trans authored texts; fiction is a neglected area of study and offers a different perspective on trans authorship as well as a far greater circulation among a wider demographic of people.

Also discussing the potential impact of fiction, Mar and Oatley suggest that it has the ability to invoke empathy, learning and understanding in ways that other narrative forms such as 'life narratives', 'television', 'cinema' and 'theatre' do not (Mar and Oatley, 2008, p. 184-185). Trans fiction may thus be more apt for the task of humanising trans lives than any other form of narrative. Mar and Oatley go on to note that 'a narrative can help us learn to empathise with types of individuals with whom we have no personal experience (Mar and Oatley, 2008, p.181). It is suggested that creating empathy through literature may be helpful in the goal of reducing bias against outgroup members, and they go on to describe a number of empirical studies that have worked to prove this, largely considering race, even finding that exposure to diverse literature 'proved more effective than having White children interact with African-American children on a shared task' (Mar and Oatley, 2008, p.181). They suggest that literature is more effective than interaction perhaps due to the fact that it:

allows individuals to approach these [outgroup] with sufficient psychological distance and feelings of control to promote true empathy and perspective-taking. Direct contact may be experienced as too threatening or otherwise emotionally arousing for a great deal of empathy or even sympathy to take place [...] The structure and expectations of literature that encourages empathy in order for comprehension to occur also permits the reader to pull back cognitively and emotionally when desired and thus may be ideal for fostering understanding between different groups (Mar and Oatley, 2008, p.181).

What this shows is the impact that fiction can have on lived experience, both for the ingroup and the outgroup, the privileged and oppressed. Furthermore, something that this study does not address, is the benefit for the outgroup this particular method of awareness building can have. Having privileged people interact with texts rather than individuals not only allows for more 'perspective-taking', but also means that no member of the oppressed group is at risk from any negative behaviour that may result

from the 'aroused emotions' that direct contact may inspire. What can be inferred from this is that literature has the potential to be of crucial political importance and can therefore act as a tool of activism. This is not to say that such works are, or must be, written with the intention of being explicit works of activism or didacticism, only that they have the potential to be so.

Significantly, a common feature in texts about trans people is their didacticism, as they often feature definitions of key terms and discussions of the stages of transition. Trish Salah uses this didacticism to mark a division between writing by trans people, and trans fiction, stating when interviewed by Hans Rollman that:

A lot of the time trans people's writing is written as if for a non-trans audience. It runs in an explanatory direction and can entail some self-othering. I would distinguish trans literature from that, as literature that imagines trans people as audience. I think about it as literature which engages the idea of trans people as a reading public. Literature is often thought of as a way of expressing the values or history of a community and in order to do that in a way that is not reductive, one needs to be writing towards other trans people (Salah in Rollman, 2015)

This foregrounding of audience, the 'writing towards', is crucial as it highlights how the intended recipient of a text may alter the content. As Salah notes, the content is a key piece of cultural output that has an impact on the way in which a community is viewed. This is something that will be discussed in greater depth in chapter 3. This implies that, whilst it is the case that trans fiction may have a positive political impact on cis readers, these texts should not be written *for* cis readers. As Plett notes, '[m]ost novels are not asked to act as tolerance workshops first and good books second' (2015). Indeed, Katharine Cross explicitly describes the new wave of trans writing as being 'not meant to be didactic for the cisgender reader. At least not in the traditional sense' (2014). Therefore, what we can see here is that writing specifically *for* a trans audience is a crucial aspect of the definition of trans fiction. However, Cross also notes, 'if a man writes a decent book with a female protagonist, we don't go ahead and call it women's lit' (Page, n.d.) and so implies, as Morgan did above, that authorship is also crucial to

the genre.

Plett discusses the growing popularity of trans themed texts, describing what she calls 'Gender Novels' as 'sympathetic novels about transition by people who haven't transitioned' (2015). As mentioned previously, novels about trans characters by cis authors have received more literary and academic attention than those by trans authors. Plett's main concern about this is the replication of a single narrative propagated by such authors, she states 'the Gender Novel does not represent the truth of trans lives' (Plett, 2015), instead these texts 'rehash stale, demeaning tropes' (Plett, 2015). What this highlights is the impact of author identity and lived experience on the content of the work. Further to this, Morgan notes that, '[w]hen we talk about the literature of an identity group we mean that members of the group want to read about people like themselves' (2010). Plett's proposition that cis authored texts fail to do this further highlights the necessity of trans authorship being included in the definition of trans fiction.

Contemporary trans authored narratives appear to be very much influenced by the evolving social perceptions of trans communities and experiences. As Hines has noted 'transgender narratives are formed through divergent gendered experiences and constructed in relation to temporal factors of generation, transitional time span, and medical, social and cultural understandings and practices' (Hines, 2006, p.49). This is reflected in the evolution of content in trans fiction. Novels such as Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues*, published in 1993, concentrate on locating trans identities within a society that has previously failed to account for them; more recent novels, such as Imogen Binnie's *Nevada* (2013) focus more on the protagonist's personal development. This is indicative of a society that, whilst still socially, legally and economically hostile to trans people, has evolved to have a cultural awareness of their existence and a limited understanding of the diversity of trans identities. As such, fiction is able to focus more on personal identification, lived experience, and political engagement. Furthermore, this suggests a shift in 'the representation of trans people as audience rather than objects of representation' (Salah in Rollman, 2015).

My choice to use only trans authors may be framed by other community-text based

arguments such as those seen in Postcolonial and Disability Studies. Aihwa Ong states that community 'informants' are 'active cultural producers in their own right, whose voices insist upon being heard and can make a difference in the way we think about their lives' (in Besio, 2005, p.322). This shows that community produced representation is crucial in how that community is viewed by non-members (see chapter 3). The foregrounding of the voices of subjugated groups is also a key aspect of Mary Louise Pratt's work on transculturation, in which she states '[i]f one studies only what the Europeans saw and said one reproduces the monopoly on knowledge and interpretation that the imperial enterprise sought' (2008, p.7). Pratt here draws attention to how power and bias lead to homogenous narratives and limited understanding. In this case, Europeans and imperial interests may be substituted with cisgender and cisnormative interests as a way to highlight the dangers of using only cisgender authored texts. Additionally, Pratt goes on to note that '[w]hile subjugated peoples cannot readily control what the dominant [culture] visits upon them, they do determine to varying extents what they absorb into their own, how they use it, and what they make it mean' (2008, p.7). This suggests that trans and cis representations of a particular culture would differ. This is in no small part due to the lived experiences of each group. Trans people, in being members of an oppressed group, are faced with a number of situations and pressures that are not experienced by cis people. Just as their experiences of the same societal spaces would differ greatly, so too may their representations of them in fiction.

Further highlighting the importance of acknowledging the direct lived experiences of subjugated groups and allowing their perspective to be brought to the fore, in "Reading Black Intimacies", Felice D. Blake speaks about '[b]lues epistemology' as 'a form of consciousness' that 'purposefully undermines the binaries [...] that restrict the examination of African American expressivity to the dominant categories (urban, violence, primitivism, cultural pathology) used to describe Black culture' (2008, p.193). Furthermore, a 'Blues epistemology enables a social critique grounded in individual and collective memories of Black experiences' (Blake, 2008, p.193). In agreement with this, Joseph Harris notes, 'we write not as isolated individuals but as members of communities whose beliefs, concerns, and practices both instigate and constrain, at least in part, the sorts of things we can say', and therefore, '[o]ur aims and intentions in

writing are thus not merely personal, idiosyncratic, but reflective of the communities to which we belong' (1989, p.12). Community is a crucial aspect of trans politics and theory, as I will further discuss in chapter 3, and is therefore a common theme within the texts I analyse in this thesis. The social history of the trans community is vastly different to cisgender social history because trans people have historically been culturally, legally and medically discriminated against in ways that cis people never have. As such, cultural norms and experiences are likely to differ between the two groups. Norms are, by their very nature, taken for granted, and so there is likely to be a gap between representations of a community's norms written by those within and outside of that community (see chapter 3), further iterating why it is important to read those works written by people from subjugated groups. Furthermore, Rosemarie Garland Thompson states that because subjugated experience, be it based in disability, class, race or gender, 'is so strongly stigmatised and is countered by so few mitigating narratives, [that] the literary traffic in metaphors often misrepresents or flattens the experience real people have' (Thompson, 1997, p.10). This echoes Katharine Cross and Casey Plett's arguments that cis-authored, trans themed texts are flawed and based largely on stereotypes. Trans fiction, according to the definition used in this thesis, is written by the community that it represents, and may therefore act as a 'mitigating narrative' (Thompson, 1997, p.10) to refute, or at least supplement, the assumptions of a privileged society's understanding of subjugated identities and communities.

Alongside its concentration on trans authors, this thesis will also focus on Anglo-American texts and the Western cultural and historical understanding of trans identities. This is because '[o]utside of the West, an intermediate gender status or third gender category with a special social function exists in many cultures in a variety of forms'; two such examples include 'the Native American berdache and the hijras of India' both of which exist in their cultures as members of a third gender (Nataf, 1996, p.13). Whilst these examples defy binary gender categories, they have little impact on Western understandings of both gender and trans issues. In fact, the West has actively worked against this. It is well documented that during the British occupation of India, the hijras were made taboo, the impact of which carried through until April 2014 where 'the supreme court of India ruled that transgender people would be recognised on official documents under a separate "third gender"', meaning that 'for the first time,

there are quotas of government jobs and college places for hijras' (Khaleeli, 2014), although they still face a level of ingrained social stigma. As such, while these identities may not have been consistently supported by their society, they were at least recognised. By contrast, Western countries needed to establish the very concept of trans before social *rights* could be considered.

Furthermore, I only analyse trans fiction that was published after 1990. This is for two reasons. First, similar to the argument above regarding Western understandings of trans identities, specifying a time period allows for a cohesive set of texts that emerge from and fit within a shared understanding of what trans is, rather than needing to conceptualise how trans has been defined and how it has been understood diachronically. Second, both trans theory and trans fiction became fully established in the 1990s, with trans theory emerging from queer and feminist theory (see Stone, 1991; Nataf, 1996; Halberstam, 1998; Prosser, 1998), and trans writing establishing itself outside of auto/biography, initially in Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues* (1993). When choosing my texts, I was mindful that I wanted to be as diverse as possible. My search led to the inclusion of novels by authors of various gender identities, ethnicities, and social classes. In order to achieve this, it was necessary to include self-published works. Similarly, my framework for analysing trans fiction foregrounds the work of trans academics such as Jay Prosser (1998), Stephen Whittle (2000, 2006) and Julia Serano (2007, 2013). I also refer to blogs and online content written by trans people to allow for diverse opinions that are not restricted by lack of access to cultural capital. Such work is often also at the forefront of the current politics and activism and gives grassroots accounts of the impact of cultural change. I utilise news stories to provide a wider societal context of the way in which trans people are viewed. Further, I occasionally use relevant work by cisgender academics such as Sally Hines (2006, 2010) and Rachel Carroll (2011, 2012, 2018). Through using this array of sources, I have been able to offer a multifaceted account of trans theory and analysis of my chosen texts.

## **0.6 Structure of Thesis**

In this Introduction, I have offered an opening discussion of the definitions of trans theory and trans fiction, highlighting their complexity and foregrounding lived

experience as a crucial aspect of both. I have begun to examine the existing scholarship on trans issues in order to establish the multitude of trans identities that will be discussed throughout this thesis and the ways in which they are treated within society. I have highlighted some key issues regarding the Anglo-American legal and medical systems that negatively impact trans lives and have begun to discuss how cultural norms may lead to problematic readings of trans identities. Furthermore, I have outlined the methodological approach of combining academic and activist sources using analyses of trans authored fiction texts to establish the key themes used within this thesis.

As the themes of trans theory and trans fiction are directly related, I argue that the use of trans theory to analyse trans narratives enables me to provide a close reading of the text itself, but also to locate fictional occurrences within their political context. This thesis is divided into four key themes: essentialism, passing, visibility, and violence and each theme builds upon the last. The link between and across each chapter together is the consideration of a trans person's subjective lived experience being fundamental to the understanding of both trans theory and trans fiction. I begin by discussing anti/essentialism. Essentialism inherently links sex and gender and is, as such, the foundation for a great deal of trans oppression. Essentialist beliefs are read onto the body through passing, the second theme I address, which describes how trans people present themselves and are viewed by their society. I also explore the visibility and representation of trans communities, examining how each can improve the lived experience of trans people by humanising them within wider societal narratives. Finally, I explore the themes of society and violence; issues of physical and identity violence stem from a given culture's basis in essentialism, how this is reflected through passing and how it may be lessened through improved representation. Each new theme builds upon those preceding it and applies complex theoretical ideas to lived experiences and their representation within trans fiction.

Chapters 1 to 4 open with a discussion of theory and context to ascertain the ways in which each theme is understood, followed by two sections of textual analysis that show how the theoretical discussion may be used to analyse fiction. I have chosen to open with a section dedicated to theory in order to firmly establish the complex and

often contradictory perspectives on the specific theme of that chapter. In highlighting significant aspects of the theory and linking them to the lived experiences of trans individuals I am able to then draw upon key examples of character's interactions with their identity, culture and community. I show how cultural issues such as cissexism may also be witnessed in fictional texts, for example when Buck in *Roving Pack* has his embodiment questioned when his trans identity is revealed (Lowrey, 2012, p.33). Without the initial sustained discussion of theory, my textual analysis would regularly need to switch between discussion of the novels and theory, lessening the impact and clarity of each. Further, in establishing the theoretical basis of my approach at the beginning of each chapter I also wish to highlight the political potential of a trans literary analysis in which the cultural issues raised within the fiction are addressed with the purpose of humanising the trans characters. I analyse two fiction texts in every chapter and have ensured that each text focusses on a different trans identity. For example if one text centres on a trans woman, the other will have a trans man or non-binary protagonist. This allows for an acknowledgement of the different ways in which individuals of different identities may experience or represent similar issues and themes. Each text may be analysed using any of the four core themes (essentialism, passing, visibility, and violence), however, for each chapter I have chosen texts that have particular relevance, whether that is through character or setting. For example, in chapter 2, which focusses on the topic of 'passing', I use *Transition to Murder* (James, 2012) because the protagonist, Bobbi, works to pass as both female and male at different points in the narrative, highlighting how passing as one's authentic gender has a vastly different impact than passing as the gender assigned at birth on that person's sense of self.

Chapter 1 provides a discussion of the complexities of essentialism and anti-essentialism within understandings of trans issues, particularly regarding the issue of gender confirmation surgery. It emphasises key prior discussions on the topic and furthers this work by establishing trans and cis contexts for essentialism and anti-essentialism. This allows for a nuanced discussion of the topic that addresses, as far as possible, all trans identities and embodiments. This chapter relies almost entirely on academic sources, with some use of polemic through the discussion of Janice Raymond's anti-trans text. There is also occasional use of news sources, such as when

describing Argentina's change in law regarding trans people. I use two activist sources within this chapter, one being a reference to Laverne Cox's 'Trans is Beautiful' hashtag and the other being Natalie Reed's discussion of HBS. The use of activism here allows me to discuss hierarchies within the trans community, in this case regarding the desire, or lack thereof, for cisnormative validation. Roz Kaveney's *Tiny Pieces of Skull* (2015) won the 2016 Lambda Literary Award for Transgender Fiction and discusses how presentation, embodiment and identity may or may not be united. It addresses notions of ideal womanhood and how these can be linked to ideas of authenticity, and how concepts of what is 'natural' interact with identity. *Refuse* by Elliott DeLine (2009) was awarded the Best Overall Bisexual/Transgender Novel in the Rainbow Book Award in 2011 (Library Thing, n.d.), and more closely addresses the issue of surgery and how it relates to the embodiment of identity. The protagonist, Dean, questions his own authenticity during the narrative, asking if hormones and performativity are enough to make him a 'real' man. Each text works to highlight the different aspects of essentialist and anti-essentialist debate and are particularly complex in how they address the ways in which these ideas vary within the wider trans community itself.

Chapter 2 addresses the issue of 'passing'. I open with an overview of the term and its usage within trans communities and trans theory, highlighting how key trans scholars have discussed the term in relation to issues of sex, gender, and society. I also utilise Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's manifesto, *The Danger of a Single Story* (2009) to discuss how the use of passing as a literary trope can be damaging at a societal and individual level. Having established the key arguments, both academic and social, surrounding the notion of passing, I then address how they are portrayed in two key texts. *Stone Butch Blues* is a foundational text of the genre and 'is widely considered in and outside the U.S. to be a groundbreaking work about the complexities of gender' (Kennedy, 2016). The analysis addresses the ways in which the protagonist, Jess, both fails and achieves to pass at different points of the narrative, and ultimately how they forgo passing in order to live authentically as non-binary. *Transition to Murder* (2012) on the other hand, focuses on Bobbi, a hairdresser who is in the process of transition as she develops the ability to pass. This novel, in spite of its use of the transition trope has been praised for its undoing of cliché. John Copenhaver has commended James for 'writing a detailed, positive, and mature trans character into the pages of a crime

novel, a genre that so often sacrifices character development for the sake of plot' (2017). What both of these texts share is an open discussion of passing and what it means personally and within society. Jess finds passing to be socially beneficial, but they struggle with it on a personal level as it restricts them to a binary gender presentation. Bobbi, who initially struggles to pass, however, finds solace when she is able to, whilst remarking on how she still feels uncomfortable in her own skin at times in spite of this. This chapter uses a fairly even number of academic and activist sources. The activist sources act to provide a more up-to-date example of an issue discussed in the theory, as with Kosciesza's (2015) definition of passing compared to Whittle's (2000); or to illustrate the lived experience of an issue – as with Cox's (2015) and Mock's (2015) discussions of the everyday impact of passing or not passing. I also use activist/own voices sources to provide different perspectives on the same issue – for example, Caitlyn Jenner's perspective on passing is markedly at odds with Jetta Rae's, but they both speak from the 'same' subject position of a white trans woman in America. Using such sources allows me to provide a more detailed discussion of the ways in which one issue can affect or relate to different people in the same community very differently. The academic sources, again, provide the backdrop to this discussion, offering a more longitudinal perspective, but they also relate passing to wider theoretical issues, such as issues of sex and gender and cultural norms.

Chapter 3 addresses community and visibility. In it, I question what the notion of a trans community means, arguing that the overarching community is more of a political tool than a community group, whereas smaller trans communities are linked by shared identities or perspectives. I argue that increased visibility and representation are fundamental both to self-identification within a community and to improving societal acceptance of trans communities. This chapter features the greatest use of activist sources in the thesis due to the discussion of visibility and how its main benefit is to improve the daily lived experience of trans people through the normalisation of trans identities within society. However, this is still framed by academic discussion – for example, in the discussion of community, Eleanor Formby's (2017) work on LGBT community building and Nataf's (1996) mention of community inequalities and hierarchies is then bolstered by Binaohan (2014) and Reed's (2012) discussions on the same topic. The first novel I analyse here is *Roving Pack* by Sassafras Lowrey (2012),

which took second place in the Rainbow Book Award for transgender fiction in 2013 (Library Thing, n.d.). It covers issues of homelessness and domestic abuse as well as those of trans identification. The punk and trans communities are at the centre of this novel, highlighting issues of cultural capital, awareness and access to social resources. This is also seen in the second novel, *Otros Valles* (n.d.), a self-published ebook by Jamie Berrout, in which the lack of any local trans community, alongside the issues that protagonist, Mira, faces as a Mexican immigrant, leaves her unable to find support. *Otros Valles* is counted among the ‘small but growing numbers of trans-genre novels written by transgender women that are revolutionizing our ideas of how trans people can exist within fiction’ (Page, 2016); it highlights the importance that intersectionality plays within the trans community.

The final chapter focusses on society and violence. It largely relies on academic sources – particularly the work of political theorist Johan Galtung on violence; and Legal Studies theorists, Cynthia Lee and Peter Kar Yu Qwan’s work on the trans panic defence. When I do use activist sources, it is to highlight the everyday issues associated with the theorisations of violence being discussed, for example, when discussing Galtung’s ‘causal flow’ of violence, I use Jen Richard’s tweets on cis actors playing trans roles leading to violence against trans women to illustrate what Galtung’s theory looks like in real life for trans people. I refer to Galtung’s work on structural and cultural violence to describe the different ways in which violence is used to reaffirm oppression that is beneficial to those at the top of the power structure. I establish two key types of violence that trans people face, identity violence and physical violence, and discuss how the structural inequalities of society reinforce both. I examine the trans panic defence to highlight the socio-legal oppression that trans people experience and discuss the need for social viability to combat this, something largely achieved through trans visibility and representation. The first novel I discuss is *Nevada* by Imogen Binnie (2013), which was nominated for a Lambda Literary Award in the category of ‘transgender fiction’ (2014). It is held in high regard by the trans community, heralded as being ‘a novel specifically about trans women, for trans women, written by a trans woman’ (Plett, 2013). The protagonist, Maria, primarily discusses the more subtle acts of identity violence that are perpetuated by society, mentioning how the lack of trans viability led to her late self-realisation, and how

precarious her job feels due to society's lack of trans acceptance. Similarly, Rae Spoon's *First Spring Grass Fire* (2012), which was likewise nominated for a 'transgender fiction' Lambda Literary award (2013), also deals with identity violence. This is compounded by the conservative nature of the local community in the novel in which all 'non-normative' identities are rejected. Prathna Lor has described the novel's significance as being due to the fact that '[w]hile issues of gender and sexuality certainly underline the majority of the narrator's existential despair, the book works because it pushes the reader to understand the humanity of the narrator rather than simply a trans\* or lesbian narrative' (2012). As such, whilst addressing issues of identity violence within the text, the novel itself also works to combat this by highlighting the validity of the breadth of trans experience.

It has always been my intention that this thesis be accessible to as wide a range of readers as possible. In using both theory and advocacy in my analysis of trans fiction I highlight how literature is uniquely positioned to provide perspectives to the reading public that they may not otherwise access, whether due to academic complexity and inaccessibility or due to being intimidated by or disinterested in activism and/or legal and political discourses. In discussing complex and sometimes fraught issues in clear language I am able to establish a basis from which learning can take place. I have chosen texts that are representative of an evolving genre and which, in some way, tackle problematic narratives that exist within a cissexist society. In the analysis within this thesis, I show the applicability of trans theory and activism to fiction and address texts previously ignored within literary criticism. I describe why trans fiction is important, the benefits of using trans theory to analyse it, and the potential impact the reading of such texts can have on representations of trans lived experience in wider society. Fundamentally, I argue that the relationship between trans theory, activism and fiction is a productive space in which the reality and potential of trans lived experience may be considered. It is important to note that the majority of the texts I analyse in this thesis are written by American authors. This is at least somewhat due to issues of structural inequality, funding and access. It is the case that few trans authors have their work formally published, and those that do are often in the USA where there are a larger number of publishers, both corporate and independent, available.

Finally, it must be noted that as someone who is cisgender, I lack the lived experience that I foreground within this thesis and am privileged in ways that most trans individuals are not. Jacob Hale suggests that cisgender people writing about trans issues must '[i]nterrogate [their] own subject position [...] [and] the ways in which this affects what you see and what you say' (2009). Hale goes on to state that one should not 'totalise us, don't represent us or our discourses as monolithic or univocal', and importantly, '[d]on't uncritically quote non-transsexual "experts"' (2009). Similarly, Shon Faye, an activist and journalist, wrote guidelines for non-trans writers who are writing about trans people, in which she gives recommendations for dealing with pronouns, suggests certain phrasing, and states, '[l]ook at every time you've used the phrase "identifies as" – then delete it and replace with "is". It saves you words and makes the whole thing sound less like you don't really believe it' (2017). In this thesis I foreground the voices of trans individuals, both academic and activist, and never privilege cisgender opinions over trans lived experience. Each chapter addresses a different theme but is united by its consideration of literary texts as important political documents that have the power to effect change through improved social visibility, representation and viability. Throughout this thesis I prioritise the personal identification of all trans people and regard it as the final authoritative stance.

# Chapter 1: Essentialism and Anti-Essentialism

## 1: Introduction

It is often the case that when the topic of trans existence is raised, whether in the media or within academic discussions, the issue of surgery follows not far behind. This is, I would argue, due to a cultural reliance on biological essentialism as a method of categorisation. Essentialist thought is the assumption that there are essential biological and behavioural gendered properties, both of which are generally expressed in binary terms. Regarding trans experience, essentialism has been used to exclude and medicalise trans identities and enforce the recommendations for binary gender confirmation surgery. Anti-essentialist thought instead argues that there is no such link and that sex and/or gender are socially constructed. Anti-essentialism has subsequently been used to deny cisnormative gender boundaries and politicise movement between genders. Essentialism, therefore, has traditionally been associated with cisnormative politics, and anti-essentialism with trans and queer politics. This has been seen in various discussions of the perceived necessity of surgical intervention with regards to the social and legal acceptance of trans people's identities. In this chapter, I analyse how articulations of essentialism and anti-essentialism differ in trans and cis contexts and how this affects the textual analyses. Essentialism and anti-essentialism have been a foundational area of discussion since the early days of trans activism and trans theory, and have been, explicitly or not, the basis of a great deal of trans theory. As such, this chapter provides an explicit discussion of essentialism and the ways it is understood, drawing on key trans theory texts, such as Sandy Stone's 'Posttranssexual Manifesto' (1991) and Jay Prosser's *Second Skins* (1998). I also use several other sources that are often cited within trans theoretical discussion, such as Judith Butler's work (1990, 1993, 2004) and Janice Raymond's polemical writing (1980).

In this chapter I propose that in response to the development of trans political and theoretical ideas a more nuanced reading of essentialism and anti-essentialism is now possible. There are separate trans and cisnormative contexts for both essentialist and anti-essentialist thought concerning trans identity. In order to best illustrate this, I will

address each position separately. Section 1.1 addresses essentialism, with 1.1.1 focussing on the cis context and 1.1.2 on the trans context. Similarly, section 1.2 defines anti-essentialism, with 1.2.1 and 1.2.2 each looking at the cis and trans contexts respectively. The cis contexts are addressed first due to fact that their theoretical basis usually preceded that of trans theory, and as such, trans contexts often speak back to or refute the cis stances.

As I shall show, these four positions relate more to some trans communities than others, and I address the impact that they have had on cisnormative and radical feminist discussions of trans. The relationships between these positions are highly variable and often contradictory. However, whereas cis essentialist thought often excludes those categories that are not in alliance with it, trans theory and politics, in encompassing a diverse array of perspectives and stances, embrace all categories within the trans contexts, no matter how opposing. Therefore, everything discussed within the trans contexts of each section is part of an overall whole and simply reflects differing opinions subsumed within trans theory. The acceptance of both essentialist and anti-essentialist understandings of trans identity is fundamental to the values of trans theory and activism. Whilst is it the case that some trans communities privilege certain embodiments above others, this is not the overarching stance of trans theory and politics. Rather, it is more broadly understood that the individual's identification with an essentialist or anti-essentialist perspective acts to assist the trans person in the embodiment of their identity, and is of crucial importance to their lived experience, and so is foregrounded above all else.

It is important to note that although the discussion of anti-/essentialism may fall largely within the realm of trans theory, the practical impacts and implications of these discussions can be – quite literally – matters of life and death to trans activists as they often directly impact on trans people in society. For example, I will argue that biological essentialist beliefs lead to violence against trans people, something that activists directly address and fight against. Therefore, in this chapter, the relationship between theory and activism is quite clear; issues seen within society and fought against by activists have been analysed theoretically and placed by theorists within the larger contexts of sex, gender, performativity and biological essentialism.

In noting how 'processes of gender' are conceived, David Valentine highlights how the theorisation of trans issues has largely been external to the realities of trans lives. The norms of identity, Valentine states, vary according to where they are established, especially regarding an identity that has historically been mediated through psychomedical institutions:

In these accounts, transgender identity tends to be invoked in standard ways. First, psychological and psychiatric approaches seek to explain how and why the process of gendered development works differently (or in many accounts, *fails*) in transgender-identified people. Sociological and ethno-methodological investigations tend to focus on gendered practices, careers, and strategies, looking at how transgender-identification both subverts and upholds binary gender. (Valentine, 2007, p.106-108).

As Valentine claims, psychological theorisations seek to understand the 'failure' of trans people to conform to what is promoted as the norm, whilst, similarly, sociological study focuses on how trans identities can be used to understand concepts external to them. Gender, therefore, has been used to both target the trans community and exploit it. This is a key area of focus in my analysis of *Tiny Pieces of Skull* (Kaveney, 2015) and *Refuse* (DeLine, 2009) as it greatly impacts the way in which each character exists within the society of the text. I consider how gender has not only been understood externally, but internally by the wider trans community. I foreground the voices and needs of trans perspectives on this and include activist voices at the forefront of current debate.

The general acceptance of cisnormative essentialist beliefs in Western society is the root cause of a great deal of transphobia. The belief that biological sex and gender presentation are inherently linked leads to any uncoupling of the two being viewed as problematic and punished as a result. This is reflected in those power structures that reinforce cissexism, that is, 'the belief that transsexuals' identified genders are inferior to, or less authentic than, those of cissexuals' (Serano, 2007, p.12). A key example of this may be found in the 2016 North Carolina legislation HB2 known as the 'Bathroom

Bill' in which trans people were banned from using the correct bathroom for their gender and were instead required to use the one that aligned with the sex they were assigned at birth. The bill stated that '[p]ublic agencies shall require every multiple occupancy bathroom or changing facility to be designated for and *only used by persons based on their biological sex*' (North Carolina, 2016, p.2, my emphasis). The bill described 'biological sex' as '[t]he physical condition of being male or female, which is stated on a person's birth certificate' (North Carolina, 2016, p.2). Whilst the nature of personal identity and physical embodiment will be discussed throughout this chapter, it is the second part of this definition that provides the most immediate concern.

Whilst it is the case that trans people in the USA are able to change the sex on their birth certificate, this is only so if they have had gender confirmation surgery and are able to present official documents from their surgeon to confirm such. Additionally, the process of doing this is different in each state, may only be done at personal financial cost; and sometimes involves travelling back to the state in which one was born, therefore incurring more cost (James, 2015). As such, this process is not only biologically essentialist; it is also only available to those who are financially stable. This is a key issue within the trans community in which there are high levels of unemployment due to structural and individual transphobia. For example, in order to gain employment, it is necessary to provide legal identification, which, unless it has been changed at financial cost, will not show the correct name or gender. This creates a catch-22 situation in which, in order to get a job, one must have the correct identification, but in order to have the correct ID one must have the financial capacity to attain one.

In the UK, many trans rights stipulated within the 2010 Equality Act are related to the Gender Recognition Certificate (GRC), established by the Gender Recognition Act 2004 (GRA), which allows a trans person to adjust the gender on their birth certificate. Whilst this was a very positive step at the time, many of its stipulations are now viewed as outdated thanks to the work that has been done in the last decade to improve the treatment of trans people in society. For example, the Act states:

Although the Act makes no requirement for medical treatment to have taken place, such treatment will be accepted as part of the supporting evidence for a GRC application. It can be proved by means of a letter from the applicant's GP giving details of treatment. *Where no evidence of treatment is provided, the Panel may ask for evidence regarding why treatment has not been commenced* (House of Commons, 2015, p.12, my emphasis)

Therefore, unlike the USA, in the UK, gender confirmation surgery is not absolutely required, but it is still a crucial area of consideration for the panel that makes the decision regarding GRC approval. It is therefore implied that surgery and physical configuration are still the most fundamental aspects of a trans person's identity within official and legal contexts. It is for reasons such as these that gender confirmation surgery has been a prominent and contentious area of discussion for a number of decades (see Raymond, 1980; Nataf, 1996; Prosser, 1998; Stryker and Whittle, 2006). As noted, genital sex status is often used to judge the legitimacy of a trans person's identity and has, therefore, often been prioritised above a trans person's personal identification, embodiment and lived experience. Even outside of legal channels, the issue of surgery is often foregrounded in discussions with and about trans people, as may be seen in most journalistic output regarding trans people. This was famously decried by Laverne Cox and Carmen Carrera on the Katie Couric Show in 2014, in which Cox stated that 'by focusing on bodies we don't focus on the lived realities of [...] oppression and [...] discrimination' (Rude, 2014). The focus on surgery is often to the detriment of the personhood of trans people, who are objectified and reduced to their genital status. As such, I will discuss the issues surrounding surgery in this chapter, but will do so only to illustrate the interactions of essentialism and anti-essentialism within both trans and cis contexts.

Nataf notes that 'biological sex is universally used as a system of social differentiation' (1996, p.14). The biological is codified as natural and read as the location of identity. The essentialist position applies differently to trans identity. The cissexist perspective is that sex is an immutable fact that cannot be affected by the socially constructed aspects of gender, and as such, any gender presentation that does not align with the sex assigned at birth is somehow false. The opposing position that I present in this

chapter regarding essentialism is that *gender* is an immutable fact, one that overrides physical sex, socialisation and social acceptance. Trans essentiality holds that gender identity is essential in that it exists in spite of an opposing assigned gender. As such, gender confirmation surgery becomes a potential tool by which the body may be brought into alignment with a person's essential identity.

Anti-essentialism<sup>4</sup>, or social constructivism, holds that there is no inherent link between sex and gender. As such it generally foregrounds gender identity above biological conceptions of sex. In keeping with philosophical views of selfhood:

Tauschert viewed the social constructivist approach as an assertion of the mental over the physical that is consistent with the mind-body dualism that is the basis for Western thought, in which the mind is seen as being separate from and dominant over the physical body (Nagoshi and Brzuzy, 2010, p.436).

However, as has been noted, mainstream Western society still bases its assumptions and understanding of gender upon the biological. Transphobic violence is often enacted due to the visibility or knowledge of a trans person's status; as such, transphobia is often based on biologically-essentialist discourses. The body is shown to be a key and significant aspect of gendered identity, rooting identity not necessarily in the sexed body, but certainly in the culturally intelligible<sup>5</sup> body.

Sally Hines notes that '[m]uch debate within transgender studies has addressed the contradictions between a deconstructionist analysis of transgender and the representations of fixed identities articulated in many trans autobiographies' (Hines, 2006, p.51). The fact that trans theory covers a vast range of identities means that it

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<sup>4</sup> Anti-essentialism is used instead of social-constructivism within this chapter because trans contexts go beyond ideas of gender as a construct. Instead, both sex and gender are considered to be cultural constructs whereas personal gender identification, and how it relates to sex and gender, is considered to be definitive.

<sup>5</sup> As will be discussed at length in chapter 3, the concepts of cultural intelligibility and viability originated in Judith Butler's work. She defines cultural intelligibility as being 'understood as that which is produced as a consequence of recognition according to prevailing social norms' (Butler, 2004, p.3), and viability as being 'recognizably human' enough to warrant the 'minimum conditions for a livable life' (Butler, 2004, p.225, 226).

encompasses both essentialist and anti-essentialist understandings of sex and gender. Trans theory and politics' acceptance of multiple subjectivities acknowledges that there is no essential way to *be* trans. In addition, exploring the idea that one may be essentially trans overcomes all distinctions of sex and gender and instead focuses on personal identification and lived experience. This stance, though, is still problematic for those trans people who do not wish to identify as trans, and who instead regard transsexuality as 'a transitional phase to pass through [... so that] the transsexual can pass and assimilate as nontranssexual - one begins as female, one becomes transsexual, one is a man' (Prosser, 1998, p.11). Prosser here suggests that transition is an anti-essentialist period between two essentialist binary identity states and again emphasises the importance of trans theory's acceptance of both essentialist and anti-essentialist perspectives.

Whilst trans theory and the overarching trans *community* accept all anti-/essentialist perspectives, there are some trans *communities* who align themselves with one particular stance. This again acts to highlight the importance of my decision in this thesis to foreground the individual. This has also been noted by Stryker and Currah:

The central tensions in the field [of trans theory] are [...] structured by a tripartite focus on perspectival knowledge (of anything) gained from living a transgender sort of life; expert knowledge (by anyone) of transgender lives and related matters; and knowledge pertaining to the metacontextual conditions (potentially everything) that inform our contemporary encounter with transgender phenomena (Stryker and Currah, 2014, p.6)

This emphasises why, due to a multiplicity of transgender identities, community generalisations fail adequately to acknowledge many of the complexities of trans experience. The 'tripartite focus' in which individual, expert, and contextual understandings of trans identities and phenomena are all considered equally, both establishes and validates a diverse range of perspectives, denying an overarching schema of what it means to be and exist as trans. For this reason, whilst analyses of trans community/ies are an important aspect of trans studies, particularly regarding trans rights, issues surrounding identity are unique to each individual, and as such,

each individual's conception of their own identity must be foregrounded.

In centring the individual, a pluralistic understanding of trans identity is made possible. Roen discusses the differing stances within trans theory in terms of 'both/neither' and 'either/or': '*Both/neither* refers to a transgender position of refusing to sit within categories of woman and man, while *either/or* refers to a transsexual imperative to pass convincingly as either a man or a woman' (Roen, 2002, p.505, emphasis in original). Whilst having been politically assimilated within trans theory, this separation of transgender and transsexual subjectivities relates to the issues concerning essentialism being discussed within this chapter. Based on generalised definitions of transsexual and transgender identities, transsexuality may be linked to the essentialist wish for sex and gender to be in alignment, whereas transgender is anti-essentialist in that it does not. However, there are those who identify as transsexual who have no wish for surgery, and those who identify as transgender who do. The nature of self-definition in this way makes generalised understandings and separatist stances of terminology and identities problematic. Nagoshi and Brzuzy have discussed this, stating:

Although previous essentialist approaches viewed social identities as fixed within the person, feminist and queer theories locate social identities in the conflict between social- and self-determinants [...] If someone's social identity is understood as being fixed or essential within the person, it can validate and justify sex, racial, class and other differences as being "natural," which can ultimately reify the multiple systems of oppression. At the same time, questioning and destabilising all social identities disintegrates the individual's sense of core self within a socially oppressed group (Nagoshi and Brzuzy, 2010, p.431-432).

As such, rather than destabilising identities, trans theory aims to destabilise the oppression of people based on their identities. The acceptance of a broad range of identities counteracts any disparities between social- and self-determinants and 'encompasses and transcends feminist and queer theory by explicitly incorporating ideas of the fluidly embodied, socially constructed, and self-constructed' (Nagoshi and Brzuzy, 2010, p.432). In this way, the acceptance of both essentialist and anti-

essentialist conceptions of gender are incorporated into the basis of trans theory. As such, rather than questioning how sex and gender are constructed, it instead analyses how self-constructed social identities interact with the society in which they are displayed. This is reflected in my own approach, particularly as it is applied to the fictional texts within this thesis. The foregrounding of the individual and the diversity of what comes under the trans umbrella means that the opinions held within trans theory:

differ widely in their degree of belief in the fluidity of gender identity. Some accept such fluidity only to the extent that one can switch between two otherwise separate, essentialist, and pure gender categories, whereas others believe that an embodied gender is still highly malleable (Nagoshi and Brzuzy, 2010, p.432).

The diversity of these stances will be discussed within the 'trans context' subheadings of this chapter, and it is this trans theoretical context that will be used to analyse the two literary texts, Roz Kaveney's *Tiny Pieces of Skull* (2015) and Elliott DeLine's *Refuse* (2009). Both texts feature protagonists that, through the course of their narratives, develop an articulation of how their identity, body and gender presentation come together in a way that feels authentic to them. Both texts also show how these protagonists' societies receive them as a result of their identity and how this impacts their lived experience. *Tiny Pieces of Skull* presents a more essentialist view due to the characters' regular interaction with medical discourses, whereas *Refuse* uses regular didactic dialogue between two characters in order to articulate different essentialist and anti-essentialist perspectives. The cis context within this chapter is given to further explore the theoretical negotiations of essentialist and anti-essentialist thought and to provide a background for the development of trans theory itself.

### **1.1: Essentialism**

This section addresses the ways in which essentialism, the linking of sex and gender, has been understood within trans and cis contexts. I will open with the cis context in order to lay the theoretical foundations upon which trans theory builds.

### 1.1.1: Cis context

The subject of essentialism in trans studies has often been considered in tandem with that of passing, or being read as cisgender, as will be discussed in the next chapter. Within the radical feminist debate exemplified by Janice Raymond in the 1980s, the linking of passing and essentialism was through the equation of a trans person expressing their gender identity and the enforcement of patriarchally mandated gender roles. Raymond states in *The Transsexual Empire* (1980) that '[t]ranssexualism offers a unique perspective on sex-role stereotyping in a patriarchal society', she notes that the role of 'passing' requirements enforced by gender clinics 'reinforc[ed] sex-role stereotypes' (p.xvii). However, this is also a concern raised by trans theory. Trans theory's acceptance of all gender identities and its vilification of anything that limits a person's gender expression establishes the strictly binary requirements of gender clinics as problematic. Passing is viewed by trans theory as being a viable option, but only when actively chosen by the person in question. Being forced into passing, as promoted by gender clinics, is a violation of a person's gender expression and embodied identity. Within trans theory, foregrounding the individual means accepting both sides of any particular equation, in this case, both the choice to pass or not to pass, or the acceptance of both essentialist and anti-essentialist ideals. Rather than placing the onus on the trans person, as Raymond does, trans theory concerns itself with how the norms of society impact each trans individual and affects their lived experience.

Whilst Raymond's and trans theory's perspectives may have briefly overlapped regarding gender clinics' enforcement of binary gender roles, second wave feminism and trans theory are often perceived as being incompatible due to the biologically essentialist views of some well-publicised commentators such as Sheila Jeffreys (1997, 2014), Germaine Greer (1999; in Wahlquist, 2016) and Julie Bindel (2003). Highlighting this essentialist stance, Raymond famously argued that '[a]ll transsexuals rape women's bodies by reducing the real female form to an artefact' (1980, p.104). Raymond is speaking from a biologically essentialist viewpoint, suggesting that only those assigned female at birth may be understood as women, a perspective still seen in the bathroom bill. However, using the same language as Raymond, trans rights campaigner, Sally Outen describes her pre-surgery 'physical dissonance [...] as "a

feeling like I was being raped by my own unwanted anatomy” (in Penny, 2009). Using the analogy of rape, both Raymond and Outen imply issues of consent. However, they have opposing stances. For Outen, and indeed for trans theory, the stance is that of the individual, and the violation is on the part of society. She has not given consent to infer maleness from her body, and as such, her anatomy presents itself as the tool by which her society violates her gender identity. For Raymond, the violation is on the part of the trans person; she states that they do not have any right to claim their gender identity, and in doing so without societal permission, they are violating that identity and as such violating those who were ‘naturally’ born into that identity. To extend the analogy, for one person to violate many is a dictatorship, for one person to be violated is rape. As such, Raymond’s actual implication is that trans people are dictators, exploiting cisgender identity. However, dictatorship indicates power, something that trans people do not have within a transphobic, cissexist and cisnormative society, and as such, Raymond’s argument loses meaning. Whilst each statement presents an equally essentialist view of personhood and embodiment, they lie in direct opposition to one another. This is an example of the complexities of essentialist and anti-essentialist views and the ways in which they interact differently within trans and cis contexts.

Raymond goes on to state that, ‘[t]here is no doubt that selfhood presupposes embodiment’, that ‘who we are should not be defined by exclusive reference to our bodies. Our existence transcends [...] the limitations imposed on us by our bodies’ (Raymond, 1980, p.168-169). Returning to trans issues, she states that:

Transsexuals [...] move totally in the realm of the body while thinking that they are transcending the body [...] Transsexuals are thus saying that who they are is irrevocably determined by what body they are born with and by what body they surgically convert to (Raymond, 1980, p.169).

On the one hand, Raymond takes the biologically essentialist position that only accepts, those assigned female at birth. On the other hand, she is saying that ‘womanhood’ is separate, but somehow connected to the body, and that a transsexual’s desire for bodily integrity therefore prevents them from experiencing it.

She in fact equates womanhood with the 'spirit' attached to the 'creative ground' of the body (Raymond, 1980, p.169). As such, Raymond's arguments against trans identities are awash with contradictions. To suggest that transsexuals 'rape' the 'real female form' is to suggest that the female body is the centre of femininity; however, to later say that womanhood is akin to the spirit and the body is a convenient place for that womanhood to attach itself, is to repudiate her earlier point. Additionally, such a position fails to account for both those under the trans umbrella who forgo surgery, and for any non-binary individuals.

Bettcher notes that 'Raymond's position is underwritten by a substrate view about sex according to which sex exists as a given prior to the machinations of culture' (Bettcher, 2009), a viewpoint that has since been largely replaced by Butler's notion of performativity. Another weakness of Raymond's argument is the 'underlying assumption [...] that oppression experienced by transsexuals (and trans people more generally) is nothing but an aspect of the sexist oppression enforced through sex role' (Bettcher, 2009). However, as hate crime laws attest, transphobia is a key issue in and of itself. Furthermore, it is necessary to account for intersectional oppression, which acknowledges the ways in which one person may be oppressed for multiple aspects of their identity in different ways and at different times (see Crenshaw's 1989 work on intersectionality). It is the case that trans people may face both sexist and transphobic oppression at once, and this may be further compounded by racist, ableist, and homophobic oppression.

Trans academic Sandy Stone wrote her renowned essay, 'The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto' to respond to Raymond's text directly, speaking from an anti-essentialist viewpoint. In this essay Stone states that '[s]ex and gender are quite separate issues, but transsexuals commonly blur the distinction [...] [by] referring to [...] their situation as being in the "wrong body"' (Stone in Epstein and Straub, 1991, p.281-282). But rather than forsaking transition altogether, as Raymond suggests, Stone proposes the notion of the 'posttranssexual', someone who, instead of 'living successfully [and often secretly] in the gender of choice, to be accepted as a "natural" member of that gender' (Stone in Epstein and Straub, 1991, p.296) rejects 'passing' in order to take 'responsibility for *all* of their history' and therefore reappropriating their

difference (Stone in Epstein and Straub, 1991, p. 298). This promotes the anti-essentialist idea that sex and gender are not inherently linked, but still accepts the essentialist desires of those who wish for surgery. It has been noted that it was this essay that initiated the development of trans theory. As Bettcher states:

Sandy Stone's (1991) groundbreaking work gave birth to trans studies, Leslie Feinberg (1993) and Kate Bornstein (1994) laid the foundations for the new transgender politics (2014, p.383-384).

The advent of trans studies, alongside the development of third wave feminism which moved away from Raymond's stance and towards Butler's, meant that '[f]or the first time, trans people were theorising themselves for themselves' (Bettcher, 2014, p.384). It is this that led to the more complex and inclusive understandings of anti-/essentialism.

Other ways in which essentialist considerations of sex and gender have been used in cisnormative society include the separation of operative and non-operative trans individuals. Due to the pervasive biological essentialism of Western society, body and identity have been considered to be innately linked. As a result of this, those trans people and identities that bring body and identity into alignment through surgery are often seen as more valid than those who do not. Therefore, there has been a separation of 'transsexuality', which is traditionally defined as including surgical intervention, and 'transgenderism', which does not (See Nataf, 1996; Whittle, 2000). As a result of this, within an essentialist context:

Transsexualism is defined as innate and biological, not chosen, therefore deserving of both social and legal recognitions. Conversely, transgenderism is thought of as learned, freely chosen, and socially determined, therefore not deserving of legal recognition (Nagoshi and Brzuzy, 2010, p.432).

This societal imperative is evidenced by the necessity of gender confirmation surgery (GCS) and hormone treatment in order to change official documents in the majority of those countries that legally recognise trans identities. In a small number of countries,

however, distinctions between operative and non-operative identities are slowly dissolving, as in, for example, the legislation in Argentina that 'enables people to change their names and sexes on official documents without first getting approval from a judge or doctor' (Warren, 2012). However, it is the case that most countries still foreground the physical, essentialist notions of sex, gender and identity within legislature, which fails to provide support for all trans people. This creates hierarchies within a cis context whereby those who align with essentialist beliefs are provided with more, albeit still minimal, support. Zimman notes that '[a]s long as sex and gender are conceptualised as opposites, with sex playing the part of the body's precultural state, biological essentialism retains the ability to enforce and naturalise a limiting gender binary' (Zimman, 2014, p.14). This illustrates how Butler's work, and its supposition that both sex and gender are socially constructed, provides a space in which all trans identities may be viewed as equal to cisgender identities.

### **1.1.2: Trans context**

Speaking from a specifically transsexual point of view, Prosser criticises the way in which queer theory has used trans identities to emphasise the arbitrary nature of gender. He discusses how some trans identities have valuably come together with essentialism, stating how 'desire for sexed realness, for embodied sex [...] curtails [the transsexual's] capacity to resignify the symbolic' (Prosser, 1998, p.47). This places the body as the location for gender identity, suggesting that GCS and physical embodiment are the keys to a true gendered existence. Similarly, the queer focus on the destabilisation of binaries and the subsequent focus on anti-essentialist understandings of sex and gender can lead to:

the concern that transsexual voices may be silenced or ultimately erased under the umbrella of transgender. Concentrating on the artificiality of gender can de-emphasise the need for transsexuals to change their sexed bodies, which is central to a transsexual lived experience, thus excluding transsexual narratives in queer and transgender theories (Nagoshi and Brzuzy, 2010, p.432).

Whilst the issue of surgery may be politically prominent, anti-essentialist perspectives that propose that surgery is unnecessary are community validated rather than culturally viable. That is, whereas anti-essentialist views may be given more kudos in some trans political spaces, it is still the case that essentialist identities are more accepted in wider cisnormative society. As such each position is hierarchically stationed according to the context in which it is viewed and the position *from* which it is viewed. Because of these power structures, Kate Bornstein, interviewed in Nataf's book, explains that:

I think biology and genitalia in specific has a death grip on the culture's notion of gender. And I think it's going to be a long time before that melts away [...] [until then] there are always going to be people for whom genital conversion surgery is necessary for their level of comfort (1996, p.23).

Here Bornstein firmly aligns society's essentialism and the desire for GCS, highlighting how bringing a body into alignment with cisnormative assumptions of sex and gender enforces cissexist ideology. However, it may also be argued that the act of surgery is inherently anti-essentialist, as it defies the essentialist stance that biology is destiny; it foregrounds the ways in which the body is malleable. In either case, trans theory states that this choice is to be based on individual choice rather than cultural prescriptivism. This disruption of the naturalisation of a nature/culture binary may also be found in Butler's work.

Cisnormative validation is being contested by trans political movements such as Laverne Cox's 'trans is beautiful' hashtag campaign and the incorporation of all identities within trans theory and politics (Duffy, 2015). As such, it is important to understand the desire for surgery, bodily integrity and personal embodiment as a valid choice outside of cisnormative, cissexist discourses in which surgery is only ever a way to be 'less trans'. However, this understanding has not yet proliferated in all areas of society, or indeed of the trans community. Trans activist, Natalie Reed, discusses a particularly essentialist branch of the trans community, those who identify as having 'Harry Benjamin Syndrome' (HBS). HBS is a sub-group of transsexuals who believe that their experience of transsexualism is the only 'real' one, that HBS 'is a unique medical

condition', 'a birth defect', in which 'the brain is more or less literally the one sex, while the body is the other' (Reed, 2012). The HBS community believe that gender is biologically determined and binary and as such 'that HRT and SRS are the appropriate medical treatments for the "birth defect" of having been born with the inappropriately sexed body' (Reed, 2012). This leads to the belief that trans 'lesbians or non-ops, or tomboys or late transitioners or genderqueers' are not 'real' trans identities because they may not pass as non-trans (Reed, 2012). These beliefs lead to the 'validation' of HBS 'through cis-supremacist systems [...] building up their gender's worth and "realness" in contrast to those other "not-so-real" trans people' (Reed, 2012). This further entrenches cissexist transphobia against non-operative, non-passing, and non-binary trans people as it establishes a narrative of 'acceptable' trans identity that is both in keeping with, and further bolsters, cisnormative biologically essentialist views.

As Zimman notes, 'the legitimisation of genital surgery over other medical interventions [is] a demand placed on trans people by the broader social processes that regulate bodily normativity' (in Zimman, Davis and Raclaw, 2014, p.20). The prioritisation of GCS emphasises the way in which an essentialist society based on the assumption of a binary, moves into the enforcement of cissexist norms of sex/gender configuration. This deferral to cissexist normativity leads to Reed's activist argument that:

the problem with HBS lies [in] not simply making distinctions but in creating hierarchies from them and suggesting that political coalitions are a bad idea on the basis that the "upper" strata of the hierarchy will only be hindered in their push for acceptance (*in accordance with externally imposed standards*) by the "lower" strata' (Reed, 2012, italics in original)

In this case, the hierarchy is based on a 'bodily normativity' produced by a cisnormative, heteronormative, gender binary society. In creating a hierarchy within the trans community itself, especially one that is outward facing and based on gaining cissexist approval, it becomes harder for the community as a whole to unify against transphobic oppression. In her discussion of unity, Butler describes it as the 'shared structures of oppression' (Butler, 1990, p.14), meaning that unity is not necessarily

based on similar identities or experiences, but rather on shared oppression. What this comes to mean is, if all trans identities are united under the trans umbrella, then the umbrella itself comes to stand for shared oppression. Whilst those identities may have differing or opposing views on certain issues, they are fundamentally linked in at least one overarching way. That is not to say, however, that all of those identities are perceived as equal. For example, whilst those who identify as HBS consider themselves above other trans identities and try to separate themselves from the trans umbrella, this does not account for the cissexism of society, as witnessed in statements such as the following from Greer, '[j]ust because you lop off your d\*\*k and then wear a dress doesn't make you a \*\*\*\*\* woman' (in Saul, 2015). Whilst HBS individuals may not consider themselves to be a part of the wider trans community, they still face the same shared oppression. In placing itself above this need for unity, and instead presenting itself as the only legitimate form of trans identity, HBS makes it more difficult for the rest of the community to unite against common oppression. Butler suggests that:

a coalition needs to acknowledge its contradictions and take action with those contradictions intact. Perhaps also part of what dialogic understanding entails is the acceptance of divergence, breakage, splinter, and fragmentation as part of the often torturous process of democratisation (Butler, 1990, p.14-15).

Here, Butler's description of a coalition is reflective of the main focus of trans theoretical philosophy; it accounts for the foregrounding of subjective lived experience as something that is individual but additionally able to create common goals. Whereas Prosser's essentialist views link body and identity, it is not at the expense of the validation of other people's identity. Prosser is more concerned with maintaining transsexual subjectivity as valid alongside the popularised queer readings of trans identities to deny gender boundaries. However, I argue that the queer position may also be criticised from a transgender position wherein gender is not arbitrary, but culture's linking of sex and gender is. Personal gender identity is shown to be indelible and able to overcome incorrect gendered socialisation and the impact of cisnormative and cissexist assumptions of what gender identity is and where it is located. As such, both transsexual and transgender, surgical and non-surgical, binary and non-binary

identities may be considered essential. The location and expression of identity is situated with the individual.

## **1.2: Anti-Essentialism**

### **1.2.1: Cis context**

Perhaps the most famous example of cis anti-essentialist thinking is the writing of Judith Butler. Butler's most often quoted concept within the study of trans is that of 'performativity' as put forth in *Gender Trouble* (1990). The key quotation used within this discussion is Butler's reference to drag: '*[i]n imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself*' (1990, p.137, italics in original). Having argued throughout the text that gender is arbitrary and performative, a '*stylised repetition of acts*' (1990, p.140, italics in original), Butler uses drag to highlight the lack of correlation between 'anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance' (1990, p.137). Whilst the link between sex and gender has long been contested, it is this further separation of gender identity and gender performance that causes tension within trans debate. In a cisnormative context, the performance is perceived as being in the attainment of the characteristics of a gender other than that assigned at birth. Within a trans context, however, the performance is located in pre-transition gender expression, wherein the gender assigned at birth is the performance, and the post-transition gender is an accurate expression of gender identity. Prosser has critiqued Butler's stance, stating that 'the embodied subject of transgender barely occupies the text of *Gender Trouble*' (1998, p.24), and that she puts too much emphasis on those identities, 'whose crossing lays bare and disrupts the binaries that found identity' (Prosser, 1998, p.27) which tend to focus on transgender, gender fluid and non-binary identities. This focus on gender crossing disinherits from trans identification those who choose to pass, live as 'stealth' or identify as transsexual.

Alongside her discussion of the socially constructed performativity of gender, Butler suggests that:

If "the body is a situation" as [Beauvoir] claims, there is no recourse to a body that has not already been interpreted by cultural meanings; hence sex could

not qualify as a prediscursive anatomical facticity. Indeed, sex, by definition, will be shown to have been gender all along (Butler, 1990, p.8).

Therefore, whilst cisnormative society may believe that gender is designated by a stable sex, Butler argues that gender is a set of performative acts ascribed to culturally conceived biological differences and that, without the force of gender roles behind them, assigned biological sexes would have little or no impact on personhood.

Furthermore, as Bettcher points out:

The illusion of a stably sexed body, core gender identity, and (hetero) sexual orientation is perpetuated through repeated stylised bodily performances that are performative in the sense that they are productive of the fiction of a stable identity, orientation and sexed body as prior to the gendered behaviour (Bettcher, 2009).

This lack of inherent link between not only sex and gender, but also body and sex, may be seen within trans theory wherein:

conventional associations between gender and the body can be broken, particularly when it comes to the embodiment of trans people, which might lead a speaker to refer to a woman's penis or a man's vagina (Motschenbacher, 2009, p.4).

This goes a step beyond Butler's depiction of drag as the parodic assumption of gendered behaviours that expose the performativity of gender; but is in keeping with her suggestion that sex was 'gender all along' in that it is also socially constructed. Trans embodiment exposes both aspects of Butler's argument, however. Whereas Butler is dismissive of the transsexual desire for bodily integrity, often through surgery, trans theory uses individual trans embodiment and trans lived experience as its foundation and as such foregrounds the bodily autonomy of all trans people.

Prosser, arguing from a more essentialist stance, states that '[i]n transsexuality, sex *returns*, the queer repressed, to unsettle the theory of gender performativity' (Prosser,

1998, p.28, Italics in original). He argues that if performativity is all that there is, there can be no unity of self, just 'repeated stylised acts' producing the facsimile of embodiment. Prosser's key statement on the topic is this:

What gets dropped from transgender in its deployment to signify subversive gender performativity is the value of the matter that often most concerns the transsexual: the *narrative* of becoming a biological man or a biological woman (as opposed to the performative of effecting one) – in brief and simple the materiality of the sexed body (Prosser, 1998, p.32, italics in original).

Prosser's work here is very much a reaction to Butler's focus on the transgender dissolution of binaries, and as such focuses on reclaiming a space for transsexual narratives of body integrity. Here again, the contrasting nature of trans engagements with essentialist and anti-essentialist thought becomes clear. Prosser argues for the biological, essentialist and embodied location of identity. In using the terms 'biological man' and 'biological woman', Prosser is engaging with what is traditionally considered to be trans exclusionary language, the language used in transphobic discourse to denounce the legitimacy of trans identities. By using this language and claiming it as a way to discuss trans identities, Prosser simultaneously engages with trans essentialism and denaturalises cis biologically essentialist discourses. Working to the same end, Zimman approaches from the anti-essentialist perspective, claiming that embodied identity is possible without physical change. Prosser's analysis has been critiqued by Zimman (in Zimman, Davis and Raclaw, 2014) as his 'emphasis on literal transformation through genital surgery is limiting, and he goes too far when he claims that "a particular experiences of the body [as male] can't simply transcend (or transubstantiate) the literal" (1998, 59) (i.e., that discourse cannot override the reality of embodiment)' (p.19). Zimman believes that 'some degree of discursive transcendence is in fact taking place when it comes to the gendered meanings that trans men attribute to their own and one another's bodies', e.g. through the use of such lexis as 'boy cunt' or 'in using the same vocabulary to talk about both trans and non-trans men's genitals' (Zimman in Zimman, Davis and Raclaw, 2014, p.19, 26). Zimman posits that an understanding of trans physicality may be gained through the

manipulation of language and cisnormative expectations rather than of bodies themselves.

In her later text *Undoing Gender* in which she readdresses some of her previous work, Butler discusses recognition as a site of power. In the case of HBS and those trans people who gain social validation through passing, this recognition is based on cisnormative constructions of power that render their 'transness' as taboo whilst simultaneously validating them because they are 'trans enough' to pass as non-trans. As Butler states:

If part of what desire wants is to gain recognition, then gender, insofar as it is animated by desire, will want recognition as well. But if the schemes of recognition that are available to us are those that "undo" the person by conferring recognition, or "undo" the person by withholding recognition, then recognition becomes a site of power by which the human is differentially produced (Butler, 2004, p.2).

The notion that social viability is a mechanism of power is not a new one. In *Bodies That Matter* (1993), Butler states that sex is 'not simply what one has, or a static description of what one is: it [... is] one of the norms by which the "one" becomes viable at all, that which qualifies a body for life within the domain of cultural intelligibility' (p.2). This notion of cultural intelligibility, or viability, is an important area of consideration throughout this thesis as it is a key site of trans oppression and a site of trans unity when considering community viability, which will be addressed in chapter 3. In a trans context, it may be easy to gain recognition of the gender assigned at birth, but this recognition would 'undo' the trans person's identity. As such, the ways in which the trans community gains or is denied power is based on the mechanisms of recognition. This may also be illustrated through the bathroom bill; the denial of the recognition of trans identities has led to their criminalisation within certain spaces.

Cultural intelligibility is based on the repetitious performativity of gender creating the assumption of identity being natural. Butler notes that '[i]f we take the field of human

for granted, then we fail to think critically – and ethically – about the consequential ways that the human is being produced, reproduced, deproduced’ (2004, p.222). The same may be said of the way in which largely biologically essentialist Western culture generally takes the field of ‘man’ or ‘woman’ for granted based on the perception of certain biological signifiers. However, I argue that whilst the notion of ‘cultural intelligibility’ works from a cisgender perspective, from a trans perspective it is limiting. Intelligibility assigns value based on external understanding; it suggests that in order to have meaning a person must be ‘readable’ by others, legible according to their set of assumptions. As an alternative, I offer the notion of ‘cultural viability’, something that Butler mentions in *Undoing Gender*, but does not fully explore with regards to trans lives. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines ‘viable’ as meaning ‘capable of living’ and its etymology originates from the French ‘vie’, meaning ‘life’ (2018b). As such, ‘culturally viable’ means ‘culturally liveable’. This returns subjectivity to the trans person, placing the value on their life, rather than on the external forces judging it.

A number of trans theorists (see Prosser, 1998; Nagoshi and Bruzuzy, 2010) have argued against Butler’s suppositions in *Gender Trouble*. However, it has also been accepted that it is a foundational work from which queer theory and, as a result, trans theory have developed. Susan Stryker in *Transgender History* (2008) defends Butler stating that performativity has been ‘often misunderstood in some quarters of the transgender community as an assertion that gender is a merely a [*sic*] performance and therefore not real’ (p.131). She clarifies how Butler’s work is applicable within trans communities, describing Butler’s work as suggesting that ‘[g]ender is like a language we use to communicate ourselves to others and to understand ourselves’, and therefore, the ‘implication of this argument is that transgender genders are as real as any others, and they are achieved in the same fundamental way’ (Stryker, 2008, p.131). This highlights a perspective opposite to that of Prosser’s. As discussed previously, trans theory and activism embraces an extraordinary range of identities and, as such, at different times and in various contexts views a single stance in contradictory ways. This is exemplified in the different approaches to Butler’s work. On the one hand Butler’s depiction of performativity is seen as diminishing the desires of those who seek surgery and bodily integrity; on the other it is used to establish that

trans genders are equally as valid as cis genders. Ultimately, Butler's work has opened a space in which sex and gender are both understood to be arbitrary allowing for transgender and transsexual identities each to establish a dialogue in which to validate their gender integrity.

### **1.2.2: Trans context**

Anti-essentialism is traditionally understood to be the uncoupling of sex and gender as linked concepts. It is sometimes the case that gender crossing and the disavowal of essentialist links between body and identity are seen as more politically worthy within some trans communities. This is due to its explicit revelation of the constructed nature of sex and gender, and the subsequent oppression based on the naturalisation of any link between the two. However, as argued previously, the transsexual experience of linking body and gender may also be seen to be a political act whereby the supposed sanctity of the biological is displaced by surgical and hormonal manipulation, thereby revealing the inherent constructedness of that which was previously assumed to be natural.

Working from an anti-essentialist perspective, '[m]any poststructural transgender theorists in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, like Leslie Feinberg, Sandy Stone, Cressida Heyes and Susan Stryker, focussed primarily on performativity and identity politics' (McCellan, 2014). This was due to the political context of the time in which biological essentialism was being used to deny trans people their identities (as seen in the work of Raymond mentioned previously). As such, highlighting performativity as the place where both sex and gender were constructed was a way in which additionally to unsettle the societal norms that excluded trans people. However, '[m]ore recently, contemporary transgender theorists have criticised such poststructuralist gender approaches, claiming they ignore "the embodied experience of the speaking subject" and how culture acts upon that body' (McCellan, 2014). Similarly, this is a result of a context in which, due to the success of such arguments, bodies have become abstracted from identity, which for some trans people causes more dissonance than embodiment.

Sandy Stone's anti-essentialist notion of the posttranssexual, mentioned previously, and the idealist concept of a transgender identity that rejects all gender norms and

exposes them as arbitrary in order to establish all gender identities as equally valid, would seemingly benefit all those who suffer due to cissexist norms. However, lived experience and theory are not necessarily compatible. Cultural viability is based on external validation whereby the way in which a person is treated often depends upon the social contexts they are in. Nataf suggests that:

The pressure to keep fixed and intelligible gender categories [...] creates anxiety for the gender intermediate person, who may seek to alleviate dissonance and anchor identity by realigning it with sex, even after claiming a dislocation between biological sex and gender in the first instance (Nataf, 1996, p.24).

This highlights how the need for cultural viability in order to exist 'safely' in society can often overcome the need to express a personal authentic gender identity. This is remarked upon by interviewees in Katrina Roen's study. Mimi, who identifies with Roen's descriptor of 'both/neither' with regard to gender, states that, "I feel like I'm forced because of social conditioning to choose one or the other, I can't be anywhere in between and be well-accepted within society and function well in society, so I sort of have to choose" (Roen, 2002, p.513). As such, whilst Stone's anti-essentialism may reflect the true identity of a trans person, that has little impact on the viability, that is, liveability, of such an identity. Being anti-essentialist in an essentialist society may lead to a cultural dissonance in which the breaking of cisnormative expectations is punished through oppression or violence. This will be further discussed in chapter 4.

It is sometimes the case that gender crossing and the disavowal of essentialist links between body and identity are seen as more politically worthy. However, as argued previously, the transsexual experience of linking body and gender can be construed as a political act whereby the supposed sanctity of the biological is displaced by surgical and hormonal manipulation thereby revealing the inherent constructedness of that which was previously assumed to be natural. The political and subjective power of anti-essentialism has been discussed by Zimman who states that:

In addition to being a useful way of dislodging biological essentialism, a conceptual distinction between gender and sex is crucial for the way many

trans people articulate a self-identified, internally felt gender separate from their assigned sex [...] many trans people have become uncomfortable with a system that treats only non-trans people as biologically and naturally female or male (Zimman, 2014, p.30).

As such, Zimman emphasises how anti-essentialism is used in both personal identification and political action. This highlights the impact of anti-essentiality on the trans movement as a whole, in allowing trans communities to define their own concepts of identity outside of the strictly binary notions of cis biologically essentialist western culture.

Sally Hines notes that '[o]ver the last two decades, the concept of "identity" as characteristic of a unified essential subject has been deconstructed through postmodern and poststructuralist feminism and queer theory' (2006, p.49). Anti-essentialism's deconstruction of naturalised boundaries and binaries, such as sex and gender, male and female, etc., has the effect of mobilising and legitimating those identities that exist beyond, between, or across those binaries. However, the use of anti-essentialist ideas has not always been encompassing of all trans identities. Hines notes that whilst feminism 'has moved beyond binary models imposed by normative taxonomies of gender, [queer theory] has called into question the limitations of existing gender and sexual classificatory systems' (Hines, 2006, p.49). In other words, in light of anti-essentialism, some areas of feminism have come to accept identities beyond the binary, whereas queer theory questions the notion of classifying any identity at all. Hines, in agreement with Prosser, further states that:

Queer theory in particular has utilised the concept of difference to incorporate transgender into analyses of sexual and gender diversity. Yet, paradoxically, the lack of emphasis upon particularity within queer theory has led to a homogenous theorisation of transgender (2006, p.49).

The use of transgender identities as a method by which to illustrate the lack of an inherent link between sex and gender leads to the objectification of those identities and a disregard of lived experience and personal embodiment. It additionally fails to

account for anti-essentialist readings of transsexuality, creating a false binary between surgical and non-surgical, binary and non-binary trans individuals. Whilst it is fair to say that the questioning of essentialist, binarised and fixed notions of gender opens a space in which trans theory and politics can express more diverse ideas, the retention of more binary notions of gender and transition as a part of its politics is what separated it from firmly poststructuralist ideals of queer theory. This again highlights the necessity of comprehending trans identities as being united through shared oppression rather than shared identity. Whilst it is the case that identity is somewhat constructed through community interaction (see chapter 3), within trans theory there are both essentialist and anti-essentialist ways to read all identities under the trans umbrella, and as such, readings are dictated by each individual's definition of their own gender identity.

These contrasting understandings and expressions of both essentialist and anti-essentialist views of gender act to emphasise how trans theory must engage with a multitude of perspectives. In placing focus on the individual, community-based generalisations are made impossible, and as such a broad range of theoretical positions must be encompassed. The implications of this regarding the trans context of essentialism and anti-essentialism mean that whilst some trans views may align with those of cis theory, the important difference is that subjectivity always remains with the trans person, rather than with wider cis culture. The way in which personal understandings of how sex, gender and identity come together, and the potential impact of differing configurations of each on lived experience will be discussed in regard to both fiction texts studied in this chapter, *Tiny Pieces of Skull* (Kaveney, 2015) and *Refuse* (DeLine, 2009). Whilst Kaveney's text presents a more essentialist perspective, in which it is desired that each of the above categories come together in a cisnormative way, DeLine's text showcases a number of different perspectives in which sex, gender and identity are configured in various ways, but each is accepted as valid.

### **1.3: *Tiny Pieces of Skull***

*Tiny Pieces of Skull* by Roz Kaveney (2015) is set in the London and Chicago bar scene of the 1970s. The story follows Annabelle, the newly transitioning narrator's

tumultuous friendship with Natasha, a glamorous and more experienced trans woman who offers to mentor Annabelle through her own transition if she moves to America. Having travelled to Chicago, Annabelle arrives to find that Natasha has started a relationship with a mob-associated businessman, Carlos, and as such, no longer has time for her. The novel is a chronological narrative that follows Annabelle as she learns to make her way through life in Chicago; the friends she makes; the trans community she encounters, and her foray into sex work. The story comes full circle when Carlos leaves Natasha, and Annabelle supports her through the breakup and thereafter.

In *Tiny Pieces of Skull* (2015) Kaveney presents a range of trans characters who each experience, express and embody their transness differently. Whilst this is indicative of good characterisation in general, it is something that is made particularly apparent within the narrative through Kaveney's characterisation of Annabelle. Having largely existed outside of the trans community, Annabelle provides the reader with an outsider's perspective as she meets different members under various sets of circumstances. This allows Kaveney to engage in a more explicit level of description without presenting it as exposition. This is established from the offset when, in an analeptic scene, we witness her meeting Natasha for the first time. Annabelle does not initially know whether Natasha is trans, but notes that she spoke to her 'in so conspiratorial a voice that Annabelle started to wonder what she knew, and whether...' (Kaveney, 2015, p.3, ellipsis in original). Later, having confirmed that Natasha is indeed trans, Annabelle states that '[i]t would be rather interesting to talk to you some time' in the hope that Natasha 'could probably teach her. About eyelashes, at least' (Kaveney, 2015, p.5). When she does later meet with Natasha in a café, Natasha takes on the role of mentor, stating:

"You'll never be a woman if you eat that cream cake," she said finally, in as sepulchral a tone as she could manage.

"What does that even mean?" Annabelle found herself snapping. "Lots of women eat cream cakes; look around us." [...]

"Yes," she eventually conceded, "of course you could eat them. But it would be better if you didn't. Mexica once told me we can never afford to relax. It's

about being the best we can be. Like we're in training. Very, very basic in your case. So, no cream cakes." (Kaveney, 2015, p.1).

Here, Natasha's gloomy, funeral tone and her assertion that 'we', aka trans women, are 'always in training' indicates that she believes that a trans woman cannot simply exist as a woman but must instead always work towards it. This is reiterated by the statement 'be the best we can be', which is far from simply 'being' and speaks to the labour of embodying ideals of femininity. Furthermore, being 'the best you can be' implies that 'being the best' is not possible, but rather they are only able to be what they 'can be', that is, what they are allowed to be. Natasha aligns what she considers to be important cultural aspects of femininity with the cultural viability of a person's identity and expresses the essentialist belief that there is a fundamental link between behaviour and identity. She highlights the constant threat of being found wanting or labelled as false. Natasha is therefore a mouthpiece for an essentialist perspective and is used to suggest that there are certain mandated properties that make a person their gender, 'you'll never *be* a woman if you [...]' (Kaveney, 2015, p.1, my emphasis). For her it is not a case of simply identifying as such, but rather actively engaging with the norms and prescribed regulations of that gender in order to truly be that gender. She equates performative failure with risk: 'we can never afford to relax' (Kaveney, 2015, p.1), and expresses the distance she perceives between trans and cis female experience. She highlights an us/them dichotomy in the text in which there is no trans cultural viability, meaning that in order to gain any form of cultural viability trans people must exist within the strict cisnormative structures of that society. Ultimately, Natasha highlights that within the society of this text, trans women must work harder to gain cultural viability than cis women, and this is achieved through direct engagement with feminine essentialist norms.

The aforementioned Mexica is an infamous trans woman considered to be 'a legend' and 'the most beautiful' on the scene (Kaveney, 2015, p.171-172). She is held up as the goal for all other trans women in the text to aspire to, as she is glamorous, beautiful, and powerful within the local community. Mexica is used as a framing device within the novel, cited in the opening and closing scenes and used to highlight a number of issues within the text. In having gained power through being considered the most

beautiful, her character becomes a device to highlight how conforming to cisgender beauty ideals can bring about community viability. Additionally, the cultural capital she gains through her beauty exposes the way in which biologically essentialist society disregards such conformity. In a closing scene, Mexica makes her only appearance:

Clumping towards them on an aluminium walking-frame [...] was a woman with the most beautiful face that she had ever seen [...] She had extremely large but firm-looking breasts, a tiny waist and almost no hips. Her ankles were many inches around; from the knees down her legs were puffed into cones (Kaveney, 2015, p.171).

For Mexica, the price of trying to attain cultural viability by engaging in cisnormative beauty ideals is her health and her mobility. Her legs are the result of a surgeon using industrial silicone during cosmetic surgery, '[b]utt and hips drifted. The cheap quack cheated and gave me industrial in those shots; the tissues can't take the weight of that forever' (Kaveney, 2015, p.172). Therefore, in spite of her beauty and her position at the top of the hierarchy within her community, Mexica is still violated by the cis medical establishment. The power that she holds within the trans community does not follow into cisnormative society. It is impossible to say whether a cis person seeking the same cosmetic surgery within the narrative would have been treated in the same manner, however, throughout this text Kaveney presents a number of examples of a medical system that fails to support trans people. In fact, the only time in which a medical situation is presented as something other than negative is when Annabelle receives her breast augmentation, something she had previously considered as an option, but which is actually performed on the spur of the moment in a doctor's office as a 'tip' for providing a delivery service (Kaveney, 2015, p.19-21). What this implies is a distrust of official medical systems, something that is justified and reinforced when Annabelle's friend, Alexandra, is taken to hospital.

When in hospital, Alexandra is initially denied treatment because '[t]here were mild problems about the name on Alexandra's insurance records' (Kaveney, 2015, p.88), which leads to a situation in which Annabelle must explain and defuse the situation before her friend may be seen by a doctor. Whilst the problem is eventually resolved,

and Alexandra receives the necessary medical treatment, this scene highlights the broader impact of the paperwork and identification issues mentioned previously. This scene also reflects the realities of trans lives, since, in May 2016 '[a] transgender woman [...] died in Pakistan while operating theatre staff allegedly tried to decide whether she should be in a woman's ward' (McCormick, 2016). Whilst these two incidents occur over thirty years apart and in different worlds, one fictional and one real, they both reflect the impact of trans lives existing in biologically essentialist societies wherein their relation to cissexist norms is more important than their lives. This may be attributed to a pervading cissexism in both a society and its infrastructure in which trans identities may be legally recognised, but are not yet viewed as equal to cis identities and are still systematically othered. This is a result of cissexism and biological essentialism wherein the sex assigned at birth is held as the only valid option. Nataf discusses the essentialist binary, noting that '[b]oth for the individual and for society, the dimorphic view of the human sexes (only two distinct anatomical forms) and gender is reinforced by medical, scientific and legal discourses such as heterosexual family values' (1996, p.18). Essentialist views, then, are perpetuated, reinforced and naturalised by societal structures, which then further leads to transphobia being legitimated and excused by various societal structures.

In spite of this distrust of official medical channels, an interesting theme running through this novel is its discussion of surgery. Gender confirmation surgery is occasionally mentioned, but rarely foregrounded. One of the only times it is explicitly cited is when Mr Carpets, when speaking with Annabelle, notes 'I assumed you'd had a lot done, but you haven't [...] I mean, obviously at some point you'll want the other thing done, I assume – not that everyone does' (Kaveney, 2015, p.18). Mr Carpets' initial statement that the desire for gender confirmation surgery (GCS) is 'obvious' before quickly stating that it is not ubiquitous indicates the presumption that to surgically transition within the binary is the most rational choice and is in keeping with Natasha's previous discussion of what it means to be a 'real woman'. Annabelle expresses a certain level of ambiguity towards GCS, describing it as somewhat of an inevitability without ever directly stating a wish or plans for it; 'Annabelle knew that acquaintance with what she thought of as The Knife was a feature of her future, but...' (Kaveney, 2015, p.6, ellipsis in original). The ellipsis here indicates an unspoken

uncertainty about the necessity for surgery, which goes against the essentialist narrative in which sex and gender must be brought into alignment in order to be culturally intelligible. This is one of the only times within the text that anti-essentialist views are possibly hinted at, whereas, in *Refuse*, dialogue between essentialist and anti-essentialist perspectives is one of the main features. Within this text, passing above all else is deemed as crucial for each character. As seen with the descriptions of Mexica, the text focusses on aesthetic surgical procedures intended to allow the individual to embody cisnormative beauty standards. Within this novel, Annabelle is the only character that suggests, even through ellipsis, that becoming invisible as trans is not the only option; at every other point, cisnormative aesthetic perfection is shown to be the goal. For example, Natasha describes 'setting a trans acquaintance straight' by encouraging her to have cosmetic surgery, stating 'it was all such a lot of work just making her see what was wrong. She didn't even want her nose done, and the fuss about her lips...' (Kaveney, 2015, p.6, ellipsis in original). This implies that many of the characters in this text focus on gender presentation over more biologically essentialist embodiment, possibly due to their wishing to live a culturally viable life, something that is more easily achieved when they are read as cisgender. When discussing personal presentation, Natasha scolds Annabelle for not trying hard enough:

'I get along,' said Annabelle, knowing pretty much what the other meant. 'I'm more a member of the bohemian intelligentsia than anything else, so it's important not to-'

'If Bohemian intelligent means that you don't get your eyebrows right [...] I call it purely lazy, and that, my dear, we just cannot afford' (Kaveney, 2015, p.6).

Here, Annabelle tries to align herself with her previous social position, the 'bohemian intelligentsia' in which her appearance would be less important than her intellect, however, Natasha is quick to quell such an idea, bringing back to the fore the way in which trans women are judged on their looks before all else. Stating that they 'cannot afford' to be lazy in their looks implies that there is a cost involved in not engaging in culture's beauty norms. In a biologically essentialist society, being seen as anything other than cisgender can be dangerous and, as such, appearance becomes far more than an aesthetic preference. The choice of the word 'afford' here also suggests the

monetary cost of complying with cis-centric beauty norms. In either sense, Annabelle is resistive to the enforcement of these ideals, preferring to live as she always has, as someone whose cultural capital has been derived from their intelligence. However, Annabelle later acknowledges that surgery and bodily integrity can also be linked to personal validation. During the rather rushed decision to move from ‘imaginary tits’ to ‘real tits’ through surgery Annabelle is nervous, but reassures herself in the following statement:

I’ll do this, she said to herself, because it’s the right thing for me to do. I need to prove to myself that I mean it. After all, when I get the other thing done I’ll need to be sure, and this helps me make up my mind. If Magda tells me that I’m thinking all wrong about being a woman, that I’m thinking in terms of surface, I’ll tell her it’s a commitment in my heart and I made a choice (Kaveney, 2015, p.21).

Annabelle’s desire to ‘prove’ to herself and others that she is a woman is here linked to ideas of physicality and intelligibility. She highlights how a surface change can not only reflect but reinforce internal identity. Physical change as a ‘proof’ of ‘commitment’ to an identity is something that is required by the majority of Western legislature relating to the legal recognition of a trans person’s identity, but which additionally links sex and gender in the ways that Prosser discusses when he argues that:

the value [...] that often most concerns the transsexual [is] the *narrative* of becoming a biological man or a biological woman (as opposed to the performative of effecting one) – in brief and simple the materiality of the sexed body (Prosser, 1998, p.33, emphasis in original).

Prosser’s engagement with the trans essentialist linking of body and identity simultaneously undermines cis essentialism in that it shows that there is a ‘narrative’ of biological ‘becoming’, rather than a statement of biological surety, and is echoed in perspectives shown in Kaveney’s novel.

The Magda mentioned above is one of Annabelle's cisgender friends, and is used as a device to present a cissexist stance that holds that trans identities and embodiments are less valid. Whilst Magda seems to be encouraging of Annabelle, stating 'I will support you in what you feel you have to do in spite of my reservations' (Kaveney, 2015, p.10), the fact that she cites her reservations within what could have been a simple statement of support already indicates something less than full understanding. However, a statement she makes soon after when discussing Natasha with Annabelle compounds this. Annabelle speaks about people desiring societal acceptance:

"But, Magda," she ventured, "doesn't everybody do that sometimes? Just a bit? People need approval. It's natural."

Magda had very short cropped hair, but she managed to toss it anyway. "Don't you ever talk to me about natural," she said. "There are hypocrisies to which I will not stoop." (Kaveney, 2015, p.10).

Although they are discussing a desire for approval as 'natural', Magda's choice to relate this back to trans identity shows her biologically essentialist beliefs. In considering it a hypocrisy to link trans identity and nature, Magda is aligned with the stance in which trans people are not seen as 'natural'. Whilst this could be an anti-essentialist stance, the use of the word 'hypocrisy' has negative connotations that instead suggest that Magda sees trans identities as lesser. Whilst she seems to accept, if not wholly support, Annabelle's gender; she uses the correct name and pronouns and never directly denies Annabelle's womanhood, she still very much separates herself from trans women. Magda describes Natasha as 'so, she's, well, like you' (Kaveney, 2015, p.9), 'like you' meaning trans, implying that she is not the default and therefore 'not natural'.

As a character Magda engages with cis essentialist thought without all of the typical exclusionary politics. She is presented as being accepting of a trans person's gender presentation but not their gender identity. This is done through the distinction between sex and gender in which one is fixed and the other is more malleable, as described above. Zimman discusses this, stating:

Even when trans people's self-identified genders are portrayed as legitimate, it

often seems that sex is an immutable truth, impervious to self-identification. The habit of referring to non-trans people as *biological women/men* suggests that trans women cannot be truly biologically female, nor can trans men be truly biologically male (Zimman, 2014, p.20, emphasis in original).

This is the stance that Magda seems to take, separating biological 'truth' from gender presentation. This separation of sex and gender is in and of itself anti-essentialist, however, in this case it is based on the biologically essentialist belief that sex is immutable and defined at birth, thus highlighting the complexity of the essentialist and anti-essentialist arguments regarding trans identities.

This distinction between Annabelle and Magda's understandings of essentialism may also be seen a little further into the conversation. Magda accuses Annabelle of 'trying to ignore history' and as such present herself falsely in her new gender (Kaveney, 2015, p.28). Having been involved in several trying conversations with Magda, Annabelle writes her a letter stating:

Well, yes, of course my dear, we are all liars and unnatural. It is in the nature of things that we are. Falsehood has become, if you like, my first name and my last. You will cavil at such a use of the word 'nature'; tough. I am hysterical, though you would double-depreciate my use of the word; I am untrustworthy and unreliable. I am a thoroughly bad lot, at last, and I am really enjoying it. Given that once I was, presumably, at least superficially none of those things, imagine the freedom of making a choice which involves becoming them (Kaveney, 2015, p.30).

Here Annabelle responds to a number of Magda's insinuations, she acknowledges Magda's cissexist views and emphasises her own more posttranssexual stance in which her past and present come together. Furthermore, through the use of ambiguous language, Annabelle subtly cites anti-essentialism. In using 'we' and 'all', in her statement 'we are all liars', Annabelle could be referring to trans women, all women, or people in general; based on her previous discussion with Magda, it could be assumed that she is continuing her discussion of ideas of 'nature' and trans identity, however, in

not explicitly stating such, it leaves the statement open to other intimations. Annabelle additionally reiterates her womanhood through the use of 'hysterical', a term that is etymologically derived from the Ancient Greek for 'womb', and which she knows Magda will object to on the same grounds as her objections to the use of 'natural'. Whereas Magda locates essentialist truths within the biological, Annabelle locates them within internal identity. This point is compounded when Annabelle states, '[a]nd my tits are real. The opposite of real is imaginary, and I know what imaginary tits are like and these are not they, not ever again' (Kaveney, 2015, p.30). Whilst here Annabelle is locating truth within an aspect of her body, it only acts to reinforce the weight of the import of her internal identity, in that previously she had resignified the reality of the body by having 'imaginary tits' that has bolstered her sense of identity. As Stryker and Whittle note, '[i]ncreasingly we presume language [...] overrides the determinant of biological sex: that is, a person is the gender they claim to be, regardless of sex status', however, 'the language of sex and gender is inherently limited' (Stryker and Whittle, 2006, p.xiii). As such, Annabelle's previously 'imaginary tits' were just as much an expression of her gender identity as her physical breasts are.

Some scenes in the novel appear to be present in order to highlight different issues within the trans community. For example, the idea that it is possible to be essentially trans, or rather, the notion that being trans may be biologically determined, and therefore biologically essentialist, is raised during a conversation between a number of trans women in which two other trans women are discussed. 'There was this pair of identical twins who both became sisters [transitioned] even though they weren't in touch at the time, *which had, everyone agreed, to prove something or other*' (Kaveney, 2015, p.129, my emphasis). This may be read in two ways; first, it may be read as the promotion of a biologically determined version of trans identity, in which being trans is controlled at a genetic level, as 'proven' by the identical twins, who share DNA, also sharing trans identification. However, it may also be read from a social perspective, in which the desire to 'prove' that there is a basis for trans identity is indicative of the desire to gain cultural viability within a culture that is biologically essentialist. Nataf has noted that '[o]ften gender does not correspond exactly to sex and sometimes it is even more difficult to determine sex from interrelated but incongruent biological factors' (Nataf, 1996, p.14), and that '[i]t seems the more complex the determinants of

biological sex have become with scientific investigation, the less reliable sex is in indicating gender' (Nataf, 1996, p.14). As such, scientifically there is little basis for using the example of twins as 'proof', however, socially, the desire for proof in and of itself is significant.

This desire for proof may be linked to issues of authenticity raised during the text. Authenticity, as mentioned in the introduction, refers to an 'allegedly accurate measure of the validity of the representation of subjectivity' (Sánchez-Arce, 2007, p.141), or 'staying true to ourselves' (ibid, p.140). As such, authenticity is understood to be subjective. However, in the novel, Hennie, a character whose only real significance is to provide the next scene, accuses Annabelle of trying to seduce her partner. Hennie states, 'you said it was me you were interested in, not this gang [the trans women present]. You said they were your friends but that at the end of the day authenticity counted for something' and describes Annabelle as 'false, just pretending' (Kaveney, 2015, p.131). This presents a cissexist biologically essentialist understanding of authenticity and falsehood which is based on cisnormative understandings of sex and gender. It is Hennie's view that anyone no longer identifying as the gender assigned at birth is inauthentic or false. In spite of this, she still uses the correct pronouns for all of the trans women present, suggesting that, much like Annabelle's friend Magda, she accepts their gender identities, whilst still considering them as separate to cisgender women. This is based on the understanding that sex and gender are separate, but authenticity is based in how they come together. However, this explicit separation of sex and gender may be destabilised using Butler's stance in which sex is not the basis for gender, rather the application of gender is what defines the sexes as inherently different. It is the argument that bodies have no intrinsic meaning until gender is applied to them. As such, understanding sex as a category is a covert support of the dominant power structure and fails to acknowledge how sex and gender are *both* social constructs. The understanding of sex as natural whilst gender is a construct is the way by which cis culture enforces the naturalisation of cis identities. Alternatively, understanding both as constructs would give trans and cis identities equal 'authenticity'.

However, as mentioned previously, a way in which Butler's deployment of this

argument fails to adequately relate to trans issues is in her use of drag. Annabelle highlights this issue during her time as a sex worker when she allows a client to describe her as a 'queen'. Her internal monologue states, '[a] queen, how undignified to have to call herself that for a john, but, well, always money, not pride' (Kaveney, 2015, p.149). Whilst trans women and drag queens may both be considered by some to come under the trans umbrella, here drag queens are presented as being inauthentic. As with critiques of Butler's use of drag performers to establish the arbitrary nature of gender, the differences between trans identities and drag performances emphasise the 'contradictions between transgender narratives of authenticity and queer theory's destabilisation of identity as a categorising device' (Hines, 2006, p.51). Annabelle considers trans identities authentic, whereas drag, in its nature as performance, is considered false. As such, when considering issues of essentialism, she is describing trans identities as essential and fundamentally immutable, whereas drag identities are anti-essential with no link between physical sex, gender identity, and gender performance. Annabelle's trans essentialism does not describe a 'correct' way to be trans, but rather highlights differences between identifying as such and performing a drag act. Furthermore, Annabelle is at this point in the narrative a non-operative trans woman, meaning that she does not conform to the cisnormative biologically essentialist position demanded by other members of her community.

The client's use of 'queen' to describe Annabelle seems to be based on her physical configuration, due to her having had a breast augmentation but not a gynoplasty. Her trans embodiment leads to an externally imposed ambiguity of identity whereby in not falling within a cisnormative physical configuration, she is declared the anti-essentialist 'other', in this case outside of all 'authentic' gender. Crucially, locating Annabelle in this ambiguous position opens up a space for her client to also escape his cis-heteronormative position as male, masculine and heterosexual; 'I'll probably never do it again with a girl like you, and it seems like a waste not to. Would you mind if I asked you to go on top second time [*sic*]' (Kaveney, 2015, p.151). As seen in previous extracts, there is a separation of acceptance and equality which acts to emphasise the difference between cultural intelligibility and cultural viability. Whilst Annabelle's client respects her gender, he also separates her from cis women, instead she is 'a girl like

you', and therefore 'other'.

As I have described, from a cissexist biologically essentialist perspective, bodies are seen as the essential location of gender. Conversely, from the trans essentialist perspective it is gender identity that is seen as essential. Whilst gender identity may be fixed, the expression of it is achieved through embodiment, and its acceptance through cultural viability. As such, gender expression becomes intertwined with gender identity. The impact of this is evident when Tiffany, after overdosing on drugs, is taken from the hospital by the Mormon parents she had previously run away from. Carola states, '[i]f they've got hold of her again, well, that's it for Tiffany, for the person we know [...] If she dies [...] it won't even be her clothes they bury her in' (Kaveney, 2015, p.160). This equation of Tiffany no longer being able to express her gender and the subsequent loss of her identity illustrates the impact of gendered embodiment and gender identity. It exposes the importance of cultural viability and external acknowledgement. As Carola notes, '[w]e wouldn't know her if we saw her again' (Kaveney, 2015, p.160). This implies that knowing her gender identity would not be enough to truly know her if she was not able to express that identity. This may be linked to the discussions of subjective authenticity and the negative impacts of not being able to transition. This example is very much intertwined with the trans essentialist perspective in which gender identity is essential and holds that gender confirmation surgery is a way in which to bring sex into alignment with gender in a way that feels more authentic to the individual.

The references to the impact of external factors upon personal expression continue when Annabelle moves back to London. She states that '[t]he exotic Annabelle of Chicago gradually became something she kept in the wardrobe and only took out of its bin-liner on special occasions' (Kaveney, 2015, p.177). The multiple and evolving expressions of self interact with the environment in which they are located. It is both a case of cultural viability and contextual determinism. As Annabelle shows little interest in surgery throughout the text, mentioning it as a future inevitability, but nothing more, her identity is centred around authenticity of self-expression, rather than cisnormative biologically essentialist arguments. Whilst she does on occasion struggle with her body image due to biologically essentialist concerns, this is still based on

external factors rather than internal identification. When Annabelle is first beginning to transition, she states that the mirror 'shouted in her ear when she caught sight of herself naked that she was a monster who no-one would ever love' (Kaveney, 2015, p.8). Her concern is due to the biologically essentialist beliefs of those around her that would lead to her trans body making her unlovable. This highlights how essentialist beliefs and cultural viability are linked. Whilst trans theory places the individual at the centre of essentialist or anti-essentialist identification, the cis essentialist context will always have an impact on the way in which their identity is received by wider society.

What this text highlights most is the way in which the essentialist, cisnormative gender binary is held as an assumption. Although Annabelle never describes a particular desire for GCS it is assumed that it is something she will have. Every other trans person featured in the novel has had or intends to have GCS, and beyond a glancing mention, alternative embodiments or non-binary identities are never discussed. Although this could be somewhat attributed to the time in which the novel is set, the 70s, there is another novel featured in this thesis, *Stone Butch Blues* (Feinberg, 1993), that features non-binary identities in a timeline that runs before, during and beyond the one in this novel. What this suggests, then, is the way that a community can act as an arbiter of norms alongside society, which will be further discussed in chapter 3. *Tiny Pieces of Skull* highlights the way in which, for the society of the text, the essentialist is the normative, often to the physical or emotional detriment of the characters, even those that are able to be read as cisgender.

#### **1.4: Refuse**

*Refuse* by Elliott DeLine (2009) follows the protagonist Dean, a trans man, as he starts college in a new city. He meets and becomes friends with Colin, the only other out trans man on campus. They bond over their love of music and spend time together at both trans and cis hosted events and gatherings. They discuss the ways that they feel that they are received in each space and are often portrayed as experiencing the same space very differently. Further to this, they engage very differently with ideas of surgery and embodiment which acts to emphasise within the novel the way trans identity must be understood on a subjective basis.

The book is partially written like a memoir and moves between first and third person, with occasional interruption from the protagonist narrator. These interruptions are often ironic assessments of how a cis reader is likely to be understanding the text. For example, half way through the novel, Dean as narrator notes:

I talk too much about myself, don't I? I should check in and see how you're doing every once in a while. I'm not making you uncomfortable, am I? I sometimes worry that I come across as a bit intimidating or out of touch. As it is my duty as a transgender writer to make you realise that I am just like you (DeLine, 2009, p.170).

This disrupts the narrative of Dean as character and has the reader assess their reading of the text. In stating his 'duty as a transgender writer' Dean, and arguably DeLine, are bringing to the reader's attention the way in which many trans texts are somewhat pedagogical, but also political. In describing it as a 'duty' rather than a 'job' Dean implies that there is a group of people he has a responsibility towards, and that part of that is to show that trans people are 'just like' cis people. What this extract additionally suggests is that this novel is particularly aimed at cis readers, the 'you' is implied as being cis, and therefore that at least some of its content is intended to be informative. Simultaneously, in pointing this out during a break in the narrative, DeLine openly questions the 'accepted' trans narratives and their tropes, and, in doing so, warns against them. It also highlights how trans stereotypes are dismantled throughout the text, particularly through the inclusion of clashing perspectives through different trans characters' points of view.

These differences are introduced early in the text, for example, in the opening pages of the book Dean addresses the reader directly stating:

Unlike my kindred memoirists, there's nothing I will beg you to believe. You see, I know I'm not a real man. I inject the hormones into my body, I assume their secondary sex characteristics, I play dress up, prowl about and live in their world, but I am not one of them. Nor am I otherwise (DeLine, 2009, p.14-15).

Here, DeLine highlights the prevalence of memoir in trans writing by invoking Dean's 'kindred memoirists' rather than 'fellow writers' for instance. Dean's satire here criticises the genre as it has traditionally been allowed to exist, calling attention to the damaging tropes that have dominated the narrative of trans existence within wider cultural output. This biologically essentialist statement is particularly emphasised as ironic as it lies in direct opposition to other cited trans perspectives within the novel. It echoes and denigrates statements made by writers such as Raymond in which the 'sacred ground' of the body cannot be transcended, in which the notion of 'realness' is based upon the gender assigned at birth, which throughout the rest of the novel is shown to be a cultural fallacy. The intricacy of this satire continues in Dean's use of the phrase 'play dress up' which invokes Butler's analysis of drag and gender performativity wherein the performance, the 'playing' of gender roles exposes the arbitrary nature of sex and gender. Furthermore, the use of the verb 'prowl' connotes the predatory and secretive, invoking the damaging societal association of trans identities and deception. However, alongside the ironic nature of the narrator's interruptions, there is an element of self-doubt that suggests that the statement 'I know I'm not a real man' has been internalised. In the paragraphs surrounding this one, Dean also states, 'what am I? I've been called tomboy, lesbian, bisexual, asexual, it, androgyne, transsexual, transgender, gender-queer, plain-old queer, and the dreaded *tranny-fag*. None of these tags ever sat well with me' (DeLine, 2009, p.14). This indicates that he feels devoid of any particular identity definition; it is not that he is not a 'real man', it is that within the terminology available to him he is not a 'real' anything, there is no appropriate description of his identity yet available to him. Dean goes on to state '[h]ow the hell do you talk about something without assuming you understand it? [...] This is the same problem I have encountered deciphering my own meaning in a world where people force identities down your throat' (DeLine, 2009, p.15). Although Dean struggles to find the appropriate language to define his identity, he is quite clear about his embodiment. In line with what Zimman has noted regarding the language used by trans men, there is a tendency to 'destabilise the boundaries between female and male embodiment by decoupling gender and body while making both a matter of self-determination' (Zimman, 2014, p.30). Dean highlights a clear separation between his previous female embodiment and his current male one,

stating, 'Syracuse is forever entwined with the memories of my once female body. They are both, if you will, uncomfortable places of origin' (DeLine, 2009, p.17). Zimman's work highlights the ways in which trans men seek embodiment through the resignification of what society sees as fixed gender signifiers, something that Dean also engages with. Whilst Dean clearly demarcates a difference between his female bodied origins to his male embodiment, he also states later in the book that he does not intend to have surgery (DeLine, 2009, p.324). As such, Dean's embodiment is very much based on gender presentation and anti-essentialist understandings of what it means to be a certain gender. It becomes clear that his initial statement quoted above was addressed to the assumptions of a cis reader. He describes both a lack of adequate language available to non-binary people, and satirises the transphobic stereotypes often assigned to trans embodiment regarding 'playing dress up' and not being 'real'.

This novel follows Dean as he starts college and meets other trans people for the first time. DeLine's choice to introduce the character during this moment of change allows the reader to grow their understanding of different trans narratives as Dean does the same, and also highlights the way in which identity development and coming out are a continuous process. Dean's move to college is almost immediately impacted by his being trans by his being assigned to a women's dorm room with a female roommate. This is due to his being marked in the computer system as female. When he makes the college aware of his trans status, he is moved into a room with Colin, 'Colin was previously the only transgender man on campus, and to avoid legal problems, the college provided a private dormitory and bathroom' (DeLine, 2009, p.21). This acts as a way to bring these two trans characters together, but also highlights a number of issues. Firstly, it demonstrates the failure of most official systems to account for the potential of trans people, often only providing the options of male and female, something that is both potentially difficult to change and inappropriate for those who fall outside of the binary. Additionally, the college's allowance for first Colin and then Dean to have a separate room and bathroom, when most dorms feature shared bathrooms segregated by gender, again brings the issues surrounding the bathroom bill into question. The college, 'due to state policy [...] cannot place him to live with a male' (DeLine, 2009, p.22). As trans men, Colin and Dean are unable to share private

spaces with other men; this separation from cis men highlights the underlying assumption that physical sex is an essential property that cannot be transcended. As such, whilst the college is seemingly supportive of its trans students, through state policy it also aligns itself with biologically essentialist assumptions. Here, as with the bathroom bill, it is the law that enforces biological essentialism and the separation of trans and cis people. Should the law instead focus on banning discrimination, it would allow each institution to create and be accountable for its own policies. Furthermore, the room change is cited as being in order to avoid legal issues, rather than to support one of their students. As such, there is the implication that it is only necessary to care about trans students insofar as to avoid legal repercussions. This one example allows DeLine to highlight a number of the issues that trans people face within institutional situations, all of which in this case are predicated on the biologically essentialist linking of sex and gender.

The distinction between trans and cis people is maintained in the following pages through the character of Elsie, Dean's female roommate. Elsie refers to Colin as 'really normal despite his disorder' (DeLine, 2009, p.29) therefore categorising being trans as 'not normal' and medicalising it, implying the DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) definition of 'gender identity disorder' which has since been replaced with 'gender dysphoria'. Additionally, Colin himself enforces the trans/cis distinction, stating:

"So I'll just say it. We're both trans men."

"Oh!" said Dean. "I uh...well hm. I hadn't realised you were."

"Oh, cool, thanks!" said Colin, smiling.

"Thanks?" Dean asked, scratching the back of his hair.

"Yeah, I don't know. I'm glad I look like a regular guy." (DeLine, 2009, p.30).

Whereas the connection between passing and essentiality is usually one made by biologically essentialist cis individuals using a person's looks to assume their gender, here Colin is the perpetrator of the link. Colin's use of the word 'regular' holds similar assumptions to that of Elise's choice of words. He separates the 'regular' men from the trans ones, indicating a difference between the two. This difference is primarily based

on appearance which indicates a level of internalised cisnormativity. In trans discourse it is often the case that trans people separate themselves from cis people on the basis of lived experience, or for political purposes, because they face specific forms of oppression that cis people do not. However, this distinction based on appearance feeds more into cisnormative discourses of passing, but which is also sometimes reflected in hierarchical positioning in some trans communities, as seen in *Tiny Pieces of Skull* (Kaveney, 2015) with characters such as Natasha and Mexica who value aesthetic appearance above all else and who are revered within their community for doing so.

Throughout *Refuse*, Dean and Colin voice differing or opposing views on a number of trans issues, allowing the text to show, or at least imply, the complexity of the trans community and the experiences present within it. This is also aided by the tongue in cheek, sometimes acerbic commentary from Dean in which he cites or mocks trans themes and tropes seen in other trans novels and the media. For example, when Colin discusses the decision of whether to ‘be more upfront about being transgender’ in his band because his manager said that it would ‘make all the difference between being just another guitarist and being important [...] and Cooper seems to think I could do a lot of good for the community’ (DeLine, 2009, p.229), Dean responds:

“What community?” Dean said.

“The transgender one.”

“Does that exist then? I thought we were all isolated maniacs.” (DeLine, 2009, p.229)

Community is a common theme within many trans texts and is a prominent area of discussion within activism and theory, but here Dean cites the ‘isolated maniac’ trope that is more often seen in the media and within cis authored texts – such as *Psycho*, *Dressed to Kill*, *The Silence of the Lambs* and *Cherry Falls* [... in all of which] transgender is negatively coded, associated directly with castration, madness, murder and monstrosity’ (Phillips, 2006, p.85). Dean is often presented as being outside of the trans community and describes himself as never having felt he ‘had a self’, going on to say ‘I know they say gender is a performance, but I feel like I am completely artificial’

(DeLine, 2009, p.160, 161). Much of Dean's insecurity seems to come from trying to embody a gender that he feels comfortable with, '[m]asculinity is a rule book of contradictions and impossibilities' (DeLine, 2009, p.162). It is perhaps because of this personal insecurity that he codes all trans existence as 'isolated mania' and seems surprised when an alternative is described.

In contrast to much of Dean's expression of identity within the novel, Colin, whilst wishing to pass physically as male, is openly trans. He is not ashamed of his identity and he holds enough privilege as an educated, white man who can be read as cis that it is relatively safe for him to be public about it. Although he is politically proud of this decision, he does address the negative implications of it. This may be seen when Colin is discussing his music career with Dean. Dean, having overheard some men questioning the status of Colin's genitalia whilst he was on stage, mentions it to Colin who states:

I fucking hate being a musician half the time. I hate being in the spotlight. I should just quit. If I'm out as transgender, that that's all I'm known for. I'm always the trans-guitarist, always booked for queer events. And to the straight audience I'm always seen as the sideshow freak, no matter how open minded they pretend to be [...] So I don't mention it. And then what? People find out anyway. Queers call me a coward and straight dudes comes [*sic*] to my show and laugh at me, thinking I hide it because I'm ashamed. It's fucking bullshit (DeLine, 2009, p.55-56).

An issue of significance in this diatribe is the fact that Colin states that he hates being a musician, rather than saying that he hates being trans as would perhaps be present in other texts. This, much like trans activism and theory, places the burden of blame on cissexist and transphobic views and actions, rather than on the trans person. The fact that the men question Colin's genitalia in the first place and the fact that they call him a 'he-slash-she' (DeLine, 2009, p.53) when their assumptions about his genitalia are questioned, highlights the biologically essentialist nature of their thinking. Colin's thoughts show how such essentialist thinking can be harmful to trans people's lived experiences. It is a double bind in which being 'out' leads to people essentialising his

trans status and asking inappropriate questions about his body, whereas being 'stealth' leads to people trying to out him and doubting his gender.

Bodies are read differently in trans and cis contexts. Zimman notes that '[t]rans men's transcendence of their assigned sex is enabled, not inhibited, by the realities of the flesh [...] [and they] create a different perspective on biological maleness' (Zimman, 2014, p.19), meaning that within a trans context, genitalia does not define a person's gender identity, but rather questions the system that classifies bodies as either male or female. Zimman's work goes on to state that:

One of the most salient practices that trans men engage in when talking about their own and one another's bodies involves the coining of new words such as *bonus hole* or *front hole* to refer to the vagina [...] reworking of traditional genital terminology. This takes place by disrupting the semantic link that ordinarily exists between genitals and gender (Zimman, 2014, p.22).

This semantic disruption enables bodies to be defined by identity, rather than the reverse. Therefore, the cis men's questioning of Colin's genitalia, and subsequently his identity in their minds, would be somewhat irrelevant within a trans context. However, within a cis context, such questioning is often accompanied by cissexism and transphobia and is used to deny trans people cultural viability. This is witnessed in the men's refusal of Colin's gender and pronouns based on their assumptions about his body.

Another scene in which essentialist cissexist beliefs are brought to the fore is achieved through an epistolary insertion in which one of Dean's friends, Viv, writes explaining that she has been banned from seeing him. In the letter, Viv cites her parents as having said:

"If she were a boy," Mum said, "she'd be out playing football or working on cars. Instead she sits around drinking tea and gossiping with you. If she grew out her hair and wore some make up she'd be a very typical girl." [...]

Dad said “I don’t care how many steroids she puts in her body. Even if she had a full-faced beard and washboard abs she’d still be the gayest man I’d ever seen. I’ve seen transsexuals on TV. You can always tell. Society will never accept her.” (DeLine, 2009, p.42).

Presenting this in a letter allows for an uninterrupted expository statement that, in this case, is never directly responded to within the narrative. This particular letter acts to showcase two aspects of essentialist thought; firstly, Viv’s mother discusses essentialist gender roles, in which certain behaviours and interests are assigned as either masculine or feminine and here used as ‘proof’ that Dean’s gender identity does not outweigh his apparently feminine behaviours. Viv’s father, on the other hand, discusses more biologically essentialist beliefs, enforcing that physical sex cannot be overcome. Her father does not link passing and essentialism, however, stating that even if Dean were to be read as male on an aesthetic basis, there would still be something essentially female about him that would alert people to his trans status. These perspectives are both biologically and culturally essentialist and are fashioned to deny Dean his manhood on all possible grounds. The stance of both of Viv’s parents highlights the cissexist belief that the gender assigned at birth cannot be transcended on either physical or cultural grounds; according to them a trans person’s identity and embodiment can never be culturally viable. In including this in the text, particularly in the form of a letter separate to the surrounding narrative, DeLine is able to present a perspective seen within society without necessarily needing to show the pain this must cause Dean, something inescapable in real lived experience. This highlights the political potential of fiction within trans activism; it allows traumatic and transphobic issues to be raised without risking or intruding upon any trans individual’s suffering.

Another way in which difficult topics are addressed are through Dean’s introspection. For example, Dean discusses his internal contradictions and challenges his ability to understand himself, citing a lack of interest in sex paired with a wish to be desirable. He goes on to say:

You think testosterone injections will save you? You think surgery will save you? You think there’s anything you can do to your body that will save you?

You think any outside appearance will make you more you? There is no you.  
You are not unique. You are not beautiful; everything you are is plagiarism.  
(DeLine, 2009, p.59).

Akin to his first address to readers in the novel, this extract addresses an imagined 'you'. Whilst in the first the addressee was assumed to be the future reader of his text, here it seems to be addressed to other trans men but evolves into a form of self-flagellation in which he internalises damaging narratives prevalent in much cultural output with the effect of undermining his own identity and embodiment. It could be read as essentialist in that he states that changing bodily appearance and configuration will not lead to a sense of authenticity that he assumes cis people have without such alterations. However, he also highlights the ways in which his body is not necessarily, nor could ever be, a direct reflection of his identity. He emphasises the ways in which the body is not the location of identity, in foregrounding the ways that changing it cannot 'make you more you' and invokes Butler through the notion of plagiarism. Butler defines gender as the '*stylised repetition of acts*' (1990, p.140, italics in original), as the unconscious citation of previous, repeated and socialised acts of gender performativity. Dean's discussion of identity plagiarism highlights not only the performative nature of gender, but additionally how its workings are hidden, uncited and therefore plagiarised. However, this is framed in a somewhat negative way. Dean wishes to find 'salvation' from an unspecified threat than can be inferred as being the disarticulation of sex and gender and identity that he feels. While noting that, for him at least, this salvation cannot be found in acts of body modification, Dean fails to offer a counter measure for securing it. He does not expressly indicate that embodiment of identity is possible without physical change and somewhat implies that it is necessary through the need to be 'saved' by hormones or surgery. As such, Dean's perspective seems to be to some extent undecided. He is balancing ideals with realities and struggling to identify himself in a society in which he has no language or role models.

In response to Dean's perspective on his body, Colin states '[y]ou need to embrace being trans. So your body is different than other men. So what. You're still hot [...] You need to *celebrate* your differences' (DeLine, 2009, p.140). Here, Dean and Colin present opposing approaches to essentiality. Dean engages somewhat with cissexist

biological essentialism, wherein he believes that bodies outside of the narrow cisgender norm fail to fully embody the appropriate gender. Colin, however, presents an opinion more aligned with Zimman's work, wherein he defines bodies according to gender, not in spite of it:

This basic value is at the core of many trans people's system for understanding biological sex: female and male bodies are not defined by their corporeal realisations but by the gendered subjectivities of those who animate them. A man's body is simply the body of a man, no matter its shape or appearance (Zimman, 2014, p.25).

Whilst Colin's personal beliefs appear to be firmly anti-essentialist, his expression of this is somewhat dictated by the environment he is in. For example, when speaking about being a musician he struggles with embracing a purely anti-essentialist identity, whereas when he is with friends and other trans people he embraces it entirely. As a realist novel, this is another example that exposes to the reader how biologically essentialist society can have impact on trans people's lived experience and the ways in which they may engage differently with anti-/essentialist issues based on the context in which they are located.

The impact of living in a cisnormative society on the characters' lives may too be seen in a discussion between Dean and a younger trans man who is eager but too young to start transition. Dean states:

You don't have to change your body to be a boy. It's mind over matter [...] No, you know what, I'm not going to lie to you [...] People aren't going to treat you how you want to be treated. To the outside world, it doesn't matter what you say you are: they want physical proof (DeLine, 2009, p.154).

This reframes Dean's seemingly biologically essentialist views as a product of society's treatment rather than the internal reflection of issues regarding his gender identity. Whilst he has clear concerns regarding his genital alignment, which then impacts on his view of his sexuality, he is secure in his gender identity. As such, his reference to

'the outside world' indicates that his personal views of gender are rooted in his lived experience within a cissexist society. Dean notes this personal dichotomy, stating:

I really don't think men and women are different at all, deep down [...] Don't bother with utopian dreams. Gender is everything; it is the human experience, all of history, every culture. It poisons everything. Hormones and fancy identities can only do so much. The way I see it, I should just accept my natural body, but I can't (DeLine, 2009, p.155-156)

This indicates the ways in which being socialised within a biologically essentialist society may lead to a struggle to escape from such views. Whilst many trans people engage differently with essentialist views, for Dean it is very much based in the culturally viable body.

Dean's disavowal of the need or use of surgery is something that he maintains throughout the text and is seemingly in keeping with the choices made by many trans men in society. Zimman notes that:

trans women appear to have vaginoplasties in greater numbers than trans men have phalloplasties, for a variety of reasons, which makes trans men especially well positioned to demonstrate how discourse can do its work even in the absence of changes to the body (Zimman 2014, p.31).

Whilst Zimman's work is on the uses of genital lexis choice, this work also exposes how trans men and trans women may interact differently with certain readings of essentialism and anti-essentialism. Due to surgical limitations, trans men are less able to live in a physically essentialist way, however, due to the ability to pass achieved through the use of testosterone, it is often the case that they are read by others in an essentialist way. This is reversed for some trans women. However, it should additionally be noted that not all trans women have surgery, Raquel Willis states that:

Trans women don't all have the same genital configuration or surgical history, either – our bodies are all different. When it comes to queer women's culture,

in particular, many lesbians misguidedly deal with trauma from the patriarchy by attacking essentialist notions of manhood. But the penis is not an essential element of manhood it can beautifully and comfortably coexist with womanhood in one body (Willis, 2015).

As such both Willis and Zimman are arguing for anti-essentialist readings of trans bodies that are freed from the cis-normative signification of gendered lexis and biologically essentialist assumptions. They both argue, as does Dean at times, that semantic disruption and the reversal of traditional signifiers are a method by which trans identities and trans embodiment may be linked without the need for physical change.

Whilst generally dismissing the idea of surgical transition, Dean does mention a glancing desire for top surgery when he talks about his depression hindering from getting a job; '[w]hy don't I make the changes I need to ensure my transition is complete? Change my name, start saving, have chest surgery (it's not like I don't want it)' (DeLine, 2009, p.96). His discussion of 'completing' his transition implies a trans biologically essentialist view, in which GCS can bring sex and gender into a more cisnormative alignment. The suggestion that a transition can be 'completed' through certain actions implies that gender presentation must be accompanied by a physical confirmation of that identity in order to be entirely viable. However, Dean goes on to state that '[m]anhood is something to be earned, bought, just like everything else on this miserable continent' (DeLine, 2009, p.96). The use of the word 'manhood', not 'maleness' or 'masculinity' here is interesting; 'maleness' would imply the physical or biological, and 'masculinity' would suggest a style of being, a performance of gendered expectations. 'Manhood' as a term, however, both envelops and avoids both of these implications, it is used as a euphemism for the penis, but also suggests the unaffected, authentic act of being a man, something that Dean, and all other trans men, are. However, within the context of Dean's statement, he implies that it is something attainable rather than innate, therefore suggesting that it is more akin to Butler's notions of performative gender, which is discussed in greater depth in chapter 4. The implications of the suggestion that you are able to purchase gender, are twofold. It may be understood as anti-essentialist in its understanding that sex is not an

immutable fact and is able to be directly altered by culture. However, it also highlights the cis biologically essentialist view, wherein physical changes are not enough to establish authenticity, rather they are a 'purchase and imitation'. As such it becomes clear that cis and trans perspectives on essentialism may view the same variables in very different ways. However, the trans perspective is based in inclusivity, whereas the cissexist perspective is based in gatekeeping and exclusion. Dean's engagement with a more cis biologically essentialist context continues in his discussion of his sexuality. He states:

"Well, I'm not gay," Dean said. "I can't be."

"What do you mean?"

"There's a prerequisite."

Maggie looked confused.

"Gay men have gay sex," Dean said, crossing his arms and looking at the ugly carpet.

"And why can't trans men have gay sex?" Maggie said, folding her arms as well. Dean sighed loudly. "Because it involves cocks. There, I said it, happy?" He glared at her with startling hatred. "And I know what you're thinking. Those silicone things aren't body parts, they're chew toys. And don't give me any bullshit about transgender men just having small cocks. Using that logic, you have a tiny cock, as well, and so do most women. Why, we all have cocks! We're all gay men!" He laughed. (DeLine, 2009, p.98-99).

This invective is reflective of the use of Dean's character within this text to present acerbic commentary on trans life and embodiment that suggests internalised cissexism. Dean is often presented as an unlikable character, for example, Colin notes that '[s]ometimes Dean made him uncomfortable' (DeLine, 2009, p.230) and Mitch describes him as 'a classic pessimist' (DeLine, 2009, p.237). With this in mind, it is possible to consider Dean as a means by which the novel is able to convey negative perspectives and internal thoughts without glamorising them. Dean's perspective here directly opposes Zimman's work on the resignification of trans men's genitalia and instead engages with the cis biologically essentialist. Dean, whilst identifying as a man, suggests that he cannot be entirely male due to his lack of a cisnormative penis. He

suggests that there is a fundamental difference between cis men and trans men and implies that trans men are lacking and, as such, engages with cissexist sentiment. This raises the question of how he may discuss trans women, who are able to have surgeries that allow them a cisnormative embodiment. In basing his notions of authenticity on the physical, if not necessarily the biological, Dean undermines trans male identities. Additionally, his decision that he cannot be gay because he does not have a traditional phallus indicates that he bases notions of sexuality on externally imposed gender norms and expectations rather than personal gender identity. This is problematic from a trans theoretical perspective as it denies the gender identities of those who do not have GCS.

An interesting reversal of this stance is present in a discussion between Dean and Colin where Dean describes a person he once met at a trans support group:

He said [...] that he identified as a transgender man, but that he was born in a male body [...] Hunter went on to explain he never felt comfortable in his body and that he hated his genitalia. He had wondered if he wanted to be a woman, but that wasn't it. He felt like a man, he just didn't want his genitalia [...] So he had surgery to get female parts and started injecting testosterone, since his body could no longer produce it naturally. He said he finally felt like himself. (DeLine, 2009, p.104-105).

This shows a clear distinction between sex and gender. Whilst Hunter's sex and gender align in culturally viable ways, his internal sense of self dictates otherwise. Whilst his lived experience may be indicative of him having a type of Body Integrity Identity Disorder, his relation to the experience of trans men suggests that it is more than simple disgust over a particular body part. The reaction to Hunter's identity by those in the group exposes their cisnormative assumptions of ideal bodies. One member states that 'it was incredibly insulting' and asks 'how he could mutilate his body like that. Doesn't he know that trans men would give anything to have what he had' (DeLine, 2009, p.105). Whilst this is potentially a satirical comment by the author to expose the questions asked of trans people by cis society, it still represents within the text the

ways in which some trans communities may be more liberal and less biologically essentialist than others.

The depiction of how cisnormative society interacts with trans bodies in the text is made evident when Colin discusses his romantic relationship. Like Dean, who struggles with his sexuality due to the configuration of his body, Colin additionally has concerns about how his body and sexuality interrelate, however, rather than being internalised like Dean's, Colin's concerns are due to external forces. He states:

my first girlfriend was a lesbian, and when I told her I was trans, she got really upset [...] She like, wanted me to be a butch woman. So that was rough because I felt like I was letting her down. But then I started dating Maggie who is queer and all *now*, but before me she'd only been with regular men (DeLine, 2009, p.114).

Showing again the way in which each character is used to present a different perspective, whereas Dean censures his sexuality according to what he believes is acceptable, Colin instead focuses on how his identity and sexuality may have negative repercussions on his relationships with others. They are both concerned about the impact of not having cisnormative genitalia, however, whereas Dean feels that this disallows him his sexuality, for Colin, he accepts his sexuality but is concerned about the opinions and reactions of the other person, which is then harmful to his self-esteem. As Colin states, with Maggie, he had felt 'dysfunctional, or deformed or something' (DeLine, 2009, p.114). This is due to the essentialisation of cis bodily configurations as normative. Being aware of the way in which his body differs to this particular set of socially constructed norms, although he may accept it himself, is transfigured into a weight of responsibility for how other people may engage with his body, which then reinforces the notion that his body is not the ideal.

Within *Refuse*, whilst Colin embraces both his gender and his sexuality, Dean is left in a state of limbo wherein he identifies as a man, and is attracted to other men, but feels he cannot be considered to be homosexual, thereby leaving him no clear sexuality with which to identify. Whittle has spoken of this, stating that people have debated

‘whether sleeping with me (or people like me) would call their own sexual orientation into question’, and that ‘the questioning that trans people present to others’ identities is a growing challenge to all who place their confidence in the binary’ (Stryker and Whittle, 2006, p.xiii). As such, it becomes apparent that Dean’s own conceptualisation of his sexuality is also based in external, biologically essentialist understandings of his body. As a character, Dean shows how internalised cissexist norms can negatively impact a trans person’s sense of self. This in particular highlights how, as a text, *Refuse* reiterates how the restrictions of cissexist biological essentialism are damaging to the lived experiences of trans people.

### **1.5: Coda**

In this chapter I have argued that, whilst cisnormative essentialism holds that biological sex is immutable, trans essentialism holds that it is gender identity that is such. Equally, whilst cisnormative essentialism may define GCS as being an enforcement of cisnormative ideals of sex and gender configuration, it can also be read as an anti-essentialist act in that it defies the naturalised cissexist belief that biology is destiny. Fundamentally, engagement with these ideas occurs at an individual level, something that trans theory acknowledges in its policy of diverse inclusion and its focus on personal lived experience.

My analysis of both *Tiny Pieces of Skull* and *Refuse* has shown how each text emphasises the importance of subjective understandings of essentialist and anti-essentialist conceptions of identity. I have argued that Kaveney’s text prominently features examples of the ways in which cissexist essentialism can lead to the oppression of people based on their identities and can impact on the lived experience of trans lives. This is achieved through repeated reference to the medical establishment’s failure to treat trans people in a supportive manner, featuring multiple instances where negative physical or emotional results are experienced by the person being treated. Similarly, there are a number of times in which a cis character’s negative treatment of their trans friend or lover is justified by citing that character’s transness, as witnessed in Natasha’s relationship with Carlos.

DeLine’s novel also features oppression based on cissexist essentialism but focusses

more on the ways in which different members of the trans community interact with anti-/essentialist discourses differently when it comes to the understanding and articulation of individual identities. To do this, the novel features a range of trans characters with differing identities and opinions, but is made most explicitly clear in the relationship between Dean and Colin whose dialogue is used to explore key issues regarding identity and embodiment. My analysis of both texts highlights the complexities of essentialist and anti-essentialist arguments, and illustrates how these differ greatly when understood in trans and cis contexts.

## Chapter 2: Passing: The Single Story Narrative

### 2: Introduction

In almost every narrative that features a trans character, the issue of passing is something that is used to progress either the plot or characterisation. There are innumerable narratives that feature an ‘unexpected reveal’ of a character’s trans status, usually for comedic effect to mock another character for finding them attractive, and countless others where a trans person is mocked or abused for their gender presentation. Because ‘the majority of knowledge about the trans community comes from what people see in the news and entertainment media’ (GLAAD, 2019, p.28), the way in which trans people are represented is fundamentally important, and the way in which passing is used within such narratives is crucial.

‘Passing’ as a term refers to a person’s ability to be read as a member of an identity group other than the one assigned to them at birth. It has been used historically among people of colour who have been able to be read as white, and in gay culture to describe someone passing for straight or hiding their sexuality. As such, passing has often been tied to the idea of deception. It has been noted that:

Since the study of whiteness coincided very much with the development of transgender studies, the two are intertwined in this given cultural moment (Stryker 1998; Roediger 1999). Both intend to show previously unmarked social locations—albeit with different weights of power (Vidal-Ortiz in Stryker and Currah, 2014, p.264).

The ways in which ‘unmarked social locations’ have developed and are being dismantled is a focus of this chapter. Unlike with race and sexuality, the trans context of passing is one that is often an act of authenticity embodiment rather than as a shield against oppression. Each context of passing has its own complexities and is usually based on the desire to live a more culturally viable life. It should be noted that some individuals may desire to pass in an intersectional multiple of ways, for example, a black, homosexual trans woman may desire to pass as white, heterosexual and

cisgender, or any variation thereof, in order to mitigate multiple forms of oppression. Although passing is often framed as being a mechanism of safety, it has also been associated with a number of negative outcomes. Julia Serano has described the term's use as being 'to shift the blame away from the majority group's prejudice and toward the minority person's presumed motives and actions' (2007, p.177). Therefore, rather than blaming society's assumptive process of assigning gender, sexuality, race, etc. to a person, responsibility is instead placed upon the person being assigned such assumptions and thus linking their embodiment with deception.

The term is now widely used within a trans context and has in recent years experienced a semantic shift. Stephen Whittle writing in 2000 described passing as 'the achievement of feminine or masculine "realness"' (p.48), which indicates that a gendered 'realness' is only attainable when a person's gender presentation falls within cisnormative, and therefore binary, expectations. What Whittle, and many others at the time, imply in defining passing as an 'achievement' is that it is the trans person's responsibility to be read correctly as their gender, rather than the reader's responsibility to accurately acknowledge it. In separating producer and reader, it is possible to reframe notions of passing. This is what Aiden Koscieszka achieves in 2015 when he defines passing thus, 'when applied to transgender people, [it] means being perceived as cisgender while presenting as one's authentic gender identity' (Koscieszka, 2015). This both foregrounds self-expression and shifts the responsibility of perception from the presenter to the reader. Koscieszka's definition implies that in making the reader responsible it may be possible for anyone to be read as cisgender, in spite of their actual identity. A person may be presenting a non-binary expression of self and still be read by others as cisgender if the reader is only cognizant of binary identity options.

Whilst this reverse in responsibility from the presenter to the reader has the potential to reduce the pressure placed on trans people to pass, it additionally has the potential to further erase non-binary identities. Furthermore, in the current context of trans acceptance, or lack thereof, within society, any lack of compliance to gender norms has the potential to be punished through physical or identity violence; this is a common trope within trans texts, and is something that will be fully addressed in

chapter 4. For those who are not read as cisgender, by choice or otherwise, responsibility is returned to the presenter in the form of potential repercussions wherein they are more likely to be blamed and victimised for their perceived lack of cisgenderedness. This is linked to Julia Serano's work on cissexism, which she defines as 'the belief that transsexual's identified genders are inferior to, or less authentic than, those of cissexuals' (Serano, 2007, p.12). Society's privileging of cis identities gives them an inherent power that is presently only accessible through being read as cisgender. For this reason, passing has been an important part of the theoretical and political landscape of trans issues and as such has been thoroughly discussed within academia and activism, and seen within trans fiction and media output. Critics such as Stone (1991), Nataf (1996), Prosser (1998), and Roen (2002) have regularly illustrated multiple perspectives on the subject of passing from its necessity to its relation to essentialism, all of which will be discussed throughout this chapter.

Another aspect of cissexism in relation to passing may be considered in tandem with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's TED talk, *The Danger of a Single Story* (2009), in which she suggests that oftentimes any existence outside that of the privileged Western, white, middle-class, cisgender male is reduced to a single narrative. This dominant portrayal of a single aspect of a certain group's identity leads to the dehumanisation of that group. She states that if you 'show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again [...] that is what they become' (Adichie, 2009). In the case of trans individuals, they become a story of binary transition that results in being read as cisgender. Society and the media's central focus is always transition, physical change, and a concern about the adherence to binary gender. C.N. Lester, a prominent trans activist and artist stated on Twitter that 'coming out narratives', or the narratives of transition are so prevalent because it is an 'easier media story to spin to say "this person challenging norms" than "these norms oppress people"' (Storify, 2015a). This again highlights the placing of responsibility on the trans individual rather than on the culture that oppresses them. It is another example of cissexism that places cis experience as the norm against which trans identities are held in opposition. The 'single story' of trans that is perpetuated by society and the media is a white person who has known from a young age, who transitions early, who intends to fully, surgically transition, who is likely middle class or above if they are able to afford the

various procedures, and finally, someone who is able to pass. Whilst all of these are valid experiences, in being the only experiences that are adequately represented in society, it results in any trans person who falls outside of this one acceptable narrative, being considered 'the wrong kind of trans'. Salvador Vidal-Ortiz states that this is also something that happens within the trans community itself:

Trans discussions in both academic and activist spaces voice an intent of diversity and inclusion or demands for the end of oppression based on racism and discrimination, while they simultaneously use language in everyday interaction (in tactics of recruitment, socialization, and scholarly writing) that construes such spaces as predominantly white (Vidal-Ortiz in Stryker and Currah, 2014, p.265).

Because there is power and privilege in passing, or in moving within established hierarchies, it has been a tempting and valid choice for many trans groups and individuals both in order to gain cultural capital and to avoid violence. However, as Vidal-Ortiz states here, this can have a negative impact on genuine and sustained diversity within the trans movement and trans studies. It is noted by Susan Stryker and Paisley Currah in the introduction to their first issue of *Trans Studies Quarterly* that although they 'celebrate this flourishing realm of cultural production' of 'trans-oriented blog, zines, community forums' (Stryker and Currah, 2014, p.12), they chose not to self-publish the journal because they felt that '[t]o best wield the power of cultural capital for transgender studies, TSQ must follow the norms and standards of academic publishing' (Stryker and Currah, 2014, p.13). Therefore, the single story also comes to mean 'academically normative', in that prominent forms of discussion are presented in ways that are in keeping with legitimated forms of discourse, whereas those 'self-produced transgender knowledges' that Stryker and Currah praise are still seen as less valuable. They describe needing to work 'within systems of power that we cannot readily escape simply because we critique them' in order to challenge them from the inside (Stryker and Currah, 2014, p.12). The single story is a story of power and how to attain it by capitulating to the norms of the powerful. While I agree with Stryker and Currah's wish to 'wield the power of cultural capital', in this thesis I also wish to include those 'self-produced transgender knowledges' in order to emphasise

the restrictions that the single story places on the representations of trans existence and to highlight the multitude of stories that live beyond it. The issue of passing is one that particularly benefits from considering activist sources, as it is the ground upon which the theoretical issues of essentialism and embodiment are enacted. Without the use of activism, it would only be possible to provide a limited analysis or understanding of passing that would be largely based on theorising boundary crossing. Looking at activist, subjective sources and working from the bottom up enables an understanding of passing, and its implications on lived experience, that would otherwise be inaccessible. This is especially important because the discussion of passing is based on the external reading of a person's embodiment, that is, the process of assigning a gender role and presumed bodily configuration to the person being viewed and judging whether it falls within societal norms, it is therefore the basis for how trans people are viewed and treated in their society.

I have chosen the two texts analysed in this chapter, Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues* (1993) and Renee James' *Transition to Murder* (2012) because they each move away from the single story in some way. James' text features a protagonist who transitions later in life, whereas Feinberg's follows the traditional transition narrative before turning back on it, in which the protagonist reverses some aspects of transition to embrace a non-binary identity. Fiction, in this case, enables access to something otherwise inaccessible, the internal monologue of a character as they exist and move in a society in which their ability, or lack thereof, to be read as cisgender, has the power to impact their lived reality. These internal monologues also have great humanising potential, as, in many cases, they highlight issues that may not be otherwise captured regarding trans everyday existence, for example, the overwhelming effect offhand negative comments can have. In 2.1 and 2.2 I will discuss reasons for and against passing and how each have been discussed in academia and by the trans community. In 2.3 and 2.4, I consider how *Stone Butch Blues* and *Transition to Murder* illustrate issues of passing or crossing and how this affects their narrative. I explore how this impacts characterisation, how characters are received by their society, and the trans communities within each text. I will now establish the critical perspectives on passing so that the textual analysis may be considered within the wider theoretical context. I will first examine the reasons people may have for passing

and how it has been theorised and discussed, especially in regard to cultural capital and personal safety. I will then go on to examine the reasons people may have for actively not passing, something that is often rooted in the political desire to fight for the right to a visible existence as trans.

## **2.1: Reasons for Passing and their Impact**

Passing, by its very nature is restricted to society's binary notion of gender, which means that it is often equated with essentialism. Nataf notes that society 'attribute[s] to you genitals which correspond to your gender role presentation' (1996, p.24), and vice versa, assigns a gender according to a person's genitals. This appearance-based assumption has two effects. The first is that it allows those who pass to gain cisgender cultural capital as long as they remain 'stealth', wherein their trans status remains private. The second effect is that it has the potential to create a 'pressure to keep fixed and intelligible gender categories' which may cause 'anxiety for the gender intermediate person' (Nataf, 1996, p.24). Nagoshi and Brzuzy suggest that '[t]he extent to which transsexual individuals can "pass" as "real" men or women supports the assertion that sex and gender do not naturally adhere to particular bodies' (2010, p.436) which is in accordance with Butler's work on the socially constructed notions of sex and gender. What this suggests is that, through passing, bodies cease to be the location of gender, and it instead becomes situated in aesthetic appearance, therefore disrupting the social systems that define gender presentation as being inherently linked to what is cisnormatively considered biological sex. This is because, in being read by the social world, bodies become situated in the construction of the third person, or, the reader, something that is explored further in chapter 4. Whilst this breaks down the cisnormative sex/gender binary, it also reinforces the way in which passing is largely reliant on the simultaneous act of being stealth in order to maintain social acceptance and its subsequent safety. Speaking on this point, Sara Ahmed when discussing racial passing describes the political discourse around passing as being often used as a way to indicate the transgression of boundaries (Ahmed, 1999, p.89), as Nagoshi and Brzuzy suggest above. Further to this Ahmed notes that '[t]his [political] discourse tends to position 'passing' as a radical and transgressive practice that serves to destabilise and traverse the system of knowledge and vision upon which subjectivity and identity precariously rests' (Ahmed, 1999, p.88). However, she instead believes

that this political reading reflects a failure to theorise the ‘means by which relations of power are secured, paradoxically, *through this very process of destabilisation*’ (Ahmed, 1999, p.89, italics in original). I argue that this is also very much the case regarding trans passing. It can be argued that in being read as cisgender a trans individual is highlighting the overall ambiguity of the gender binary and its enforcement, in that, in being read as cisgender, trans people are therefore highlighting that gender presentation has very little to do with physical sex. However, as Ahmed rightly identifies, passing is additionally linked to upholding the hierarchy in question. ‘Acts of “transgression” implicit in passing do not, then, transcend the systemisation of differences into regularities’ (Ahmed, 1999, p.91). Instead, in much trans discourse, acts of passing are more often framed as methods by which to assimilate into cisnormative culture in order to remain safe from transphobic violence. Considering passing as an act of transgression is one of the reasons it is often linked to the idea of deceit, that it indicates a hiding of one’s ‘true’ nature in order to be accepted as something else. This leads to the justification of ‘punishing’ trans people for an inferred falsehood based on the presentation of their identity.

Laverne Cox describes how the issues theorised above impact the daily lived realities of trans people, she notes that ‘[b]y awarding more value to transgender people who “pass” as their gender, we send the message that something’s wrong with being trans’ (Cox, 2015). This establishes a self-perpetuating system in which in order to be accepted within society, it is necessary to pass, but, if they do pass, trans people become open to accusations of deceit which are then used to punish them. This is one of the key arguments behind Sandy Stone’s academic ‘Posttranssexual Manifesto’ (1991). However, as has been noted by a number of trans activists, it is generally the case that the risks of crossing outweigh those of passing, ‘there are those with “passing privilege” and those without—and the difference in quality of life is overwhelming’ (Godfrey, 2015). Being read as cisgender lends a certain amount of privilege to a trans person, more precarious than that of true cisgender privilege as it is reliant on being stealth, but beneficial to a trans person’s lived experience. Passing privilege can be:

vital and essential, especially for trans women where blending in is a matter of safety. To be able to make your way through a world that so often carries so much resentment, intolerance and misunderstanding about trans people, “looking the part” [...] is a life-saving privilege, one that many trans people due to economic barriers or the randomness of genetics and puberty frankly will never be able to access (Mock, 2015).

What this shows is how passing is not simply about beauty standards and aesthetic appearance, but rather it is intimately linked with safety and cultural capital. This will be further discussed in chapter 4, but, here I would like to note that passing is at the forefront of most discussions on trans issues because of such arguments. Wider society comprehends trans as a movement between genders that is then judged on aesthetic ‘success’ in which the more cisgender a person is read to be, the more successful they are considered to be. ‘The binary gender system demands that individuals confess alternative identities and learn to present themselves in ways that convince others that they are, in fact, members of the sex category suggested by their gender’ (Gagney, Tewkesbury and McGaughey, 1997, p.480). This requirement that trans people ‘convince’ others of their identity shows the way in which society comprehends trans identities as fundamentally artificial, an act of passing, not being.

Society’s enforcement of passing as a way of gaining credibility has long ranging impact within the trans community. Although passing is sometimes seen as the ultimate success of a person’s transition, it is still the case that:

To “pass” for something immediately connotes deception and untruth [...] To look at trans\* people expressing their authentic selves and say that they “pass” for men or women is to diminish their identity by implying that it’s an act (Koscieszka, 2015).

As such, even at the pinnacle of what wider society heralds as acceptable trans embodiment, the overarching message is still that trans identity is still not as authentic as cis identity. Serano defines this as cissexism, which is the ‘double standard that promotes the idea that transsexual genders are distinct from, and less legitimate than,

cissexual genders' (2007, p.162). As such, in a cisnormative context, passing is always read in a cissexist way, whereby cis gender presentation is an act of 'being' and trans gender presentation is an act of 'passing' and therefore a fabrication.

The way in which passing is parsed in cissexist society means that even those trans people who are afforded the most privilege still face some level of gender oppression. There is an externally imposed hierarchy in which even those trans people that are read as cis are still not equal to cis people, and those within the trans community are judged against not only cisnormative standards, but also judged against one another. This was seen recently in the highly publicised transition of Caitlyn Jenner. In an interview with *TIME* magazine, Jenner stated that:

One thing that has always been important for me, and it may seem very self-absorbed or whatever, is first of all your presentation of who you are. I think it's much easier for a trans woman or a trans man who authentically kind of looks and plays the role [...] If you're out there and, to be honest with you, if you look like a man in a dress, it makes people uncomfortable. So the first thing I can do is try to present myself well. I want to dress well. I want to look good (in Steinmetz, 2015).

Jenner, who otherwise embodies all requirements made by the single-story narrative as a rich, white, educated, famous trans woman who has been able to afford numerous cosmetic enhancements and as such is able to be read as cis, still foregrounds passing as the most important thing she can do. This highlights the precarious nature of trans acceptance, but also the ways in which trans people are judged, and judge themselves against, other trans people, specifically regarding physical presentation. Jenner notes that she does not want to be seen akin to someone who 'looks like a man in a dress' because it 'makes people uncomfortable'. As such, a hierarchy is created, in which Jenner is positioning herself as above those who do not pass. This type of positional judgement is based on cultural intelligibility and viability, how comfortable cis society is with a trans person's presentation and the subsequent treatment of trans people based on this. This also shows how it is possible for cissexist beliefs to be echoed by members of the trans community.

Perhaps at least in part due to the cultural capital it leverages, some trans communities value and praise the ability to pass. As Roen notes:

While recent academic and political articulations of transgenderism privilege crossing over passing, it is not uncommon for trans communities to operate with the opposite hierarchy, valuing passing and ostracising those trans people who do not seem to work hard enough at passing (2002, p.504).

As such, pressure to pass does not solely originate from outside of the trans community, but from within as well. From within, the level of pressure can vary, Vivian Taylor recounts a time that she once met with another trans woman who:

had transitioned in her teens and most folks wouldn't know she was trans unless she wanted to tell them. She had a real heart for women who were just starting to transition, but she had expectations for those people (Taylor, 2013).

Those expectations being that they try to pass. This reflects what is now seen as the more traditional view of trans, wherein being read as cisgender is of the utmost importance. This is often the result of existing in a society in which being trans is often not safe, in which those trans people who do not comply with such norms are often faced with greater levels of transphobic oppression, and as such passing becomes a mechanism of safety. This will be fully discussed in chapter 4.

In 1997 it was found that for many trans people the 'desire [to pass] was paramount [...] and taken as a symbolic testament of final arrival at their desired self' (Gagney, Tewkesbury and McGaughey, 1997, p.501). This frames passing as a positive occurrence which a trans person is able to recognise themselves and be recognised as who they are. Speaking on this, C. Riley Snorton describes the psychological benefits of passing as 'an essential part of what it means to know myself' (2009, p.79). As a 'black non-op, no-hormone transsexual' Snorton argues that passing has the ability to 'rearticulate social relations and to shape the contours of lived experiences' (Snorton, 2009, p.79-80) and describes how 'popular and academic discourses about passing

render non-operative, no-hormone transsexuals illegible in conversations about transsexuality' (Snorton, 2009, p.80). In recognising the psychological benefits of passing, and highlighting the lack of critical discussion of those who cannot, rather than those who choose not to pass, Snorton begins to articulate the impact of the way in which identity and appearance are so often intertwined in society. Godfrey has more recently described how this can be problematic, stating:

As long as the focus remains on physical appearance, trans people will feel pressured into chasing an outdated, superficial notion of femininity or masculinity, at the expense of money, time, and health. And until transition itself is celebrated, rather than scrutinised or ridiculed, they'll remain marginalised, locked out of employment, and subject to violence (Godfrey, 2015).

As such, on the one hand, passing has the potential to be an affirming experience which, as mentioned, may lead to trans people receiving increased cultural acceptance. However, on the other hand, having such a rigid expectation that passing is a requirement of trans people in order to be accepted leads to those who are non-binary, unable, or unwilling to be read as cisgender being rejected by cisnormative society.

## **2.2: Reasons for Not Passing and their Impact**

Actively choosing not to pass is sometimes known as 'crossing'. Activists such as Leslie Feinberg have stated that '[b]eing read [as trans] is equivalent to liberating territory, making new space; passing to losing ground' (Prosser, 1998, p.200). As such, the politics of passing became a crucial element of trans visibility and the fight for trans rights. What Feinberg implies is that being read as trans as a political act has the ability to improve the cultural intelligibility of trans identities. This is something that is also suggested by Jetta Rae who describes how she finds a power in refusing to pass, stating:

I enjoy being seen as a trans woman, as an incidental activist. I enjoy the thought that I make other trans people, some of whom are in the closet or passing for cis, feel less alone when I take the train or talk with my normal voice in a restaurant (Rae, 2015).

This further links crossing with visibility, which will be discussed in more depth in chapter 3. It additionally emphasises the important point regarding the definition of passing mentioned previously. The description 'passing for cis' highlights the propensity of culture to place identity upon others without their consent, locates the boundary between gender assignment and gender identity and invokes trans theory's understanding of gender being an act of self-definition and personal embodiment. Trans people are not necessarily aiming to 'pass as cis', but rather just to be read as themselves. Rae's statement also highlights the link between passing and safety. She describes how a lack of cultural intelligibility can lead to a lack of viability; the fact that her 'being seen as a trans woman' is a type of activism shows that it is not simply an act of embodiment, but rather an act of cultural norm defiance, one that opens her to the risk of transphobic violence.

Highlighting the issue of hierarchies based on passing, Nataf stated that '[b]eing out and proud versus passing has become the measure of the political consciousness and commitment of transgendered people' but notes that being 'out' has serious repercussions for many individuals (1996, p.29). This creates a dichotomy whereby passing allocates capital differently according to the context of its occurrence. Nataf's statement is rather sweeping in that it suggests that all trans communities consider passing in the same way, when, as I will argue in the next chapter, there are a multitude of trans communities, each having their own norms and stances. Nevertheless, in wider society it is almost always the case that privilege is allocated to those who pass. However, within some trans communities, 'passing is portrayed as complicit with normative gendering and therefore as contrary to the gender-transgressive ethic of transgender politics' (Roen, 2002, p.501). For these communities, passing is linked with the creation of a political hierarchy wherein 'crossing is more trendy, more radical, more exciting, and more politically worthy of merit than passing' (Roen, 2002, p.503), which Kristina Roen rightly describes as being

problematic for ‘the many trans people whose lives depend on their skill at passing’ (Roen, 2002, p.503). However, I argue that this particular statement within Roen’s work is very much of its time, a time when trans politics and theory was establishing itself as more than a spin-off faction of queer theory and therefore needed to fight for political relevance. Instead I suggest that current articulations of trans politics and theory are based in uniting all non-cis gender identities under the trans umbrella through the idea of shared oppression and are therefore focussed on gender encompassment rather than gender transgression, something that is particularly visible in the work of activists and in texts such as *Trans Bodies, Trans Selves* (Erickson-Schroth, 2014).

Whereas crossing is still somewhat viewed as a political act, the exclusionary connotations of passing being considered as a ‘sell-out’ have diminished. For those who are read as cis, the choice to do so is now more often considered to be an individual decision which is either made in order to make a political statement, to best capture a non-binary identity, or as a way in which to try to attain a level of personal safety within society. However, it is important to note that for those who do not have passing privilege, in a cissexist society, their lives are automatically put at risk and made into a political battleground. They are not afforded the privilege of being able to theorise the political potential of crossing, therefore bringing into focus the need for change at a societal level, so that passing or crossing need not be a political choice at all, but rather a personal one. Speaking on this Mattilda Bernstein-Sycamore states:

In a pass/fail situation, standards for acceptance may vary, but somebody always gets trampled. I wanted to challenge all standards of authenticity, to confront societal mores *and* countercultural norms. Instead of policing the borders with pass/fail politics, I was intent on confronting the perilous intersections of identity, categorisation, and community in order to challenge the very notion of belonging’ (Bernstein-Sycamore, 2006, p.9).

In this case, crossing is contextualised as a political act that moves beyond the boundaries of trans politics and becomes an intersectional questioning of the stability

of norms. Working from a more individual stance, one of Gagney, Tewkesbury and McGaughey's participants noted that:

At one time [passing] was important. I don't care anymore. A lot of times I'll go out in a dress ... no makeup on. I'm not trying to pass and I know I'm not going to pass. I am who I am ... It is political, everything's political. A social statement about who I am and I'm going to express myself' (1997, p.502).

This shows how each person's interaction with passing may evolve over time or shift due to context. It also highlights the way in which trans existence is read as inherently political whenever it ceases to be focussed on pandering to cisnormative expressions. The inherently political nature of trans existence as it exists in cissexist society is a key theme in both of the texts analysed in this chapter, as I will now discuss.

### **2.3: *Stone Butch Blues***

Leslie Feinberg's 1993 text *Stone Butch Blues* is a semi-autobiographical novel that follows the protagonist Jess as they navigate gender, sexuality and transition between the 50s and 70s in blue collar America. At the beginning of the novel, Jess identifies as a stone butch lesbian who feels a sense of detachment from their body. Due to this and a number of other external factors, Jess transitions to male, living as such for a number of years. The narrative follows them as they come to a slow realisation that they do not feel entirely or specifically male or female, but, rather, something in between. Jess stops taking hormones and begins to re-examine their sense of self in order to 'find out who I was, to define myself' (Feinberg, 1993, 224). Throughout the novel Jess has a number of jobs, friends and relationships, many of whom never read them as anything but male. Jess' ability to pass is something that they alternatively seek refuge in and are distressed by.

Jess exemplifies the complexity of what Judith/Jack<sup>6</sup> Halberstam describes as 'Transgender Butch' in which the borders between butch lesbian identity and trans

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<sup>6</sup> Jack Halberstam at the time of writing this article was published under the name Judith and described themselves as 'a non-transsexual' (Halberstam, 1998, p.288), they

man identity 'involve a great deal of instability and transitivity' (Halberstam, 1998, p.287-289). Jess initially expresses pride in their butch identity and finds comfort in their expression of masculinity. Their decision to transition to male is heavily influenced by external factors, as they note, they 'didn't feel like a woman or a man, and I liked how I was different' (Feinberg, 1993, p.143), but they 'can't survive as a he-she much longer [...] can't keep taking the system head-on this way' (Feinberg, 1993, p.146). As such, their transition is induced by the cissexism of a society that does not accept any identities outside of the binary, something that was even more enforced during the time in which the novel is set. Regarding Jess' struggle with society's pressures, a friend noted, 'I only knew your options were [...] few' (Feinberg, 1993, p.213), something that was at least partially due to a single story narrative within the society of the text, in which transition is only ever binary. Even now, non-binary or genderqueer identities are not widely understood or acknowledged within society, and were even less so in the time in which the novel is set. As such, Jess' identity is unintelligible and unviable. Jess' identity is beyond the majority of society's comprehension, and in order to survive such a society, Jess feels that transitioning to male is their only option. It is arguably possible that had non-binary identities been a visible and viable option, Jess may never have transitioned in such a binary fashion.

In the context of this novel, Jess' decision to transition is because being read as what we would now define as non-binary is something that bears negative repercussions. This may be seen mid-way through the text when Ed, a friend of Jess', transitions before Jess does. Upon meeting them for the first time since they started hormones, Jess asks, "Can you pass?" to which Ed replies:

"It's like I'm not taken for a man or a woman anymore. They see me as something in between. That's scary. I wish I could hurry up and get to the part where they just think I'm a man"

"But Ed, people always act like we're half-woman, half-man."

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have since transitioned and changed their name. They accept both of their names and any pronoun, hence my decision to use both names they have been published under.

“It’s true. But now they don’t know what I am and it drives them nuts. I’m telling you, Jess, if it doesn’t change soon, I can’t take it much longer. I’m doubling the shots of hormones just to try to make it work faster” (Feinberg, 1993, p.149).

This uncovers a number of issues. Firstly, in asking Ed whether he passes rather than commenting on any physical changes he may have experienced, Jess is shown as ‘seeing beneath the surface’ and reading Ed beyond their gender. Furthermore, this discussion acts as a way to highlight how society’s understanding of binary resistant identities, as exemplified by butch lesbians in this case, is based in them still being firmly located within the biologically essentialist binary and how this impacts the characters’ lives. Although butches are women expressing masculinity, something for which they are punished, they still ultimately identify as women, although it should be noted that they are not always read as such and may therefore also experience a form of cisnormative oppression. As soon as the binary is transgressed in a way that makes society uncertain of a person’s position within it, that person becomes a threat to the established order. As has been noted:

Those who are willingly or unwillingly unconvincing in their gender presentations and interactions are subject to greater levels of emotional and physical abuse than are those who are able to pass. It is those who are publically perceived as “not women/not men” who pose the greatest challenge to the binary system (Gagne, Tewksbury and McGaughey, 1997, p.504).

This challenge, according to Ed, is a cause for fear. Throughout the text the butch characters are repeatedly exposed to intensely violent reactions from both the public and the police due to their masculine expression and sexuality. This is echoed in the treatment of ‘femme gay men’, who are also victimised during the narrative (Feinberg, 1993, p.110). That a butch character therefore describes their transitional status as a cause of increased fear emphasises the extent to which visible movement between their society’s binary identities is a taboo status and that passing is a mechanism of safety.

Whilst discussing the possibility of transition with a group of their butch friends Jess states, 'I can't help thinking maybe I'd be safe, you know?' (Feinberg, 1993, p.144). This further reinforces the precarious position of those whose identity defies binary norms, highlighting how being a butch is not safe. Considering this alongside Ed's previous comment further emphasises Jess' desire to transition to male in spite of their non-binary leanings. The need to balance identity and safety in society is something that Jess and their friends each struggle with. When discussing transition, they note that:

"Yeah, but I'm not like Jimmy. Jimmy told me he knew he was a guy even when he was little. I'm not a guy."

Grant leaned forward. "How do you know that? How do you know we aren't? We aren't real women are we?"

Edwin shook her head. "I don't know what the hell I am"

(Feinberg, 1993, p.144).

This conversation addresses a number of issues, not least of all the linking of passing and safety. The butch characters clearly highlight the difference between themselves and trans men, but also their perceived differences to cisgender women. In describing themselves as not 'real' women, they imply a link between sex, gender and behavioural norms, in which women must feel or act a certain way in order to be 'real'. Rachel Carroll has noted that '[t]o identify as transgendered, then, is to take up a different position in relation to gendered norms, other than strategic conformity' (2011, p.249). This group of butches appear to fall between Carroll's two positions; they neither identify as trans, nor strategically conform to gendered norms, their authentic position is 'butch lesbian', but this is a state of being that they have found to be unviable within their society, leading them to transition in the hope of attaining it. In 'not knowing what the hell I am' these characters reveal that in their natural state, they have nothing to pass *as*. This means that if and when they do physically transition, as Jess does, they are passing as a trans person passing as male. Passing is then not a means by which they are able to be seen as themselves, but it is instead, it is a cloaking mechanism they use in order to attain a level of personal safety within their society.

During another discussion about the possibility of transition, this time with Theresa, their partner, Jess states “the hormones are like the looking glass for me. If I pass through it, my world opens up” (Feinberg, 1993, p.151), this invokes a trope often seen in trans texts: the mirror. Prosser describes mirror scenes as a:

trope of transsexual representation, the split of the mirror captures the definitive splitting of the transsexual subject [...] for the transsexual the mirror initially reflects not-me [...] as they mark the successive stages of transition, some mirror scenes illustrate and indeed participate in this cohering narrative movement between past and present selves (Prosser, 1998, 100-102).

For Prosser, then, the mirror is the narrative means by which the character is able to capture their embodiment. For Jess, though, this is not the case. Rather than looking in a mirror, Jess passes through the looking glass into a strange world of oppositions in which the more they look like who they aim to be read as, the less they feel like themselves. This is due to the reasoning behind Jess’ transition, which they do only due to the external pressures of living as a ‘he-she’. Jess states, “I’d still be a butch [...] Even on hormones” (Feinberg, 1993, p.151). In the context of contemporary trans theory this is problematic due to the fact that Jess does not strictly identify as a trans man, but rather, they are a non-binary butch lesbian who embodies masculine qualities. As such, their use of testosterone to try to pass for male is because of the pressures of living a liminally gendered existence. As Prosser has stated:

*Stone Butch Blues* demonstrates cogently the cultural significance of passing: how the stone butch’s taking hormones to pass is a passing up the ladder of social acceptability – importantly, not so much from female to male as from queer-looking butch to clean-cut straight young man (Prosser, 1998, p.182).

For Jess, passing, as it often does for many trans people, represents access to cultural capital. However, in contrast to many other trans narratives, this act of passing goes against their gender identity, thus meaning that in this case passing is ‘a projection not a reflection’ (Prosser, 1998, p.186), and as such still has the effect of gender subjugation and embodiment limitation. As Jason Cromwell has noted, ‘[a]lthough

passing as nontransgendered is almost always a reflection of identity, it is also safer than presenting as gender-ambiguous or androgynous' (1999, p.128). This once again links passing and safety and acts to illuminate Jess' decision to transition to a more culturally legible gender presentation despite their personal lack of affiliation to the identity.

Continuing the trope of reflection and selfhood, at a point in the narrative in which Jess has been on hormones for some time and has gained the ability to pass, they note that, '[m]y face no longer revealed the contrasts of my gender. I could see my passing self, but even I could no longer see the more complicated me beneath the surface' (Feinberg, 1993, p.222). This indication that the gender binary is an insufficient medium for Jess to express their sense of self additionally highlights the potential spaces between passing and living as an authentic self. Wishing for people to 'see beneath the surface' undoes the traditional passing narrative and emphasises how passing is not always conducive to expressing a person's identity. As mentioned previously, for some, passing is more for survival than for authentic embodiment. This quotation highlights the transgressive potential and personal importance of being visibly yourself and the impact of that not being the case. The fact that this dissonance occurs for Jess post-transition exposes how the enforcement of the binary had led to a scenario in which someone is learning to define themselves by discovering who they are not, rather than by exploring who they might be as Jess may have done had non-binary options been open to them at the time.

Another trans trope is the use of a romantic partner's reaction to incite tension within the narrative. In *Stone Butch Blues*, Jess' partner, Theresa, is uncomfortable with the idea of Jess taking hormones and living as male leading to a decision in which Jess must choose between their partner or the life they think they could have if they transition. Theresa describes her reasoning, stating "'If I'm not with a butch everyone just assumes I'm straight. It's like I'm passing too, against my will'" (Feinberg, 1993, p.151). Here Theresa invokes the use of the term 'passing' seen in gay culture. In saying that the passing is against her will she highlights my supposition at the beginning of this chapter that within the reading/passing dichotomy the responsibility is with the reader. The reader places their assumptions upon the person who is being

read assigning them a gender or sexuality according to their expectations. Whilst this passing promotes safety on the part of the person being read, Theresa finds it distasteful as she is proud of her lesbian identity and campaigns for women's and gay rights. Being forcibly read as something that is not in keeping with a person's identity is a form of identity violence, which will be discussed in chapter 4. It also highlights the need for increased visibility and representation in order to overcome such assumptions by readers. In having both of these characters in conversation, Feinberg is able to show arguments for and against passing. Theresa's perspective argues against passing for political reasons, whilst Jess cites personal safety as their reason for wishing to pass as male. In discussing this concept of passing from two different stances and subject positions, this scene also displays the political potential of various oppressed groups working together to fight for personal and bodily autonomy without judgement or oppression. Theresa goes on to link passing with deception when she tells Jess:

“I can't go out with you in the world and pretend that you're a man. Can't pass as a straight woman and be happy. I can't live as the scared couple in apartment 3G who can't trust people enough to have friends. I can't live like a fugitive with you” (Feinberg, 1993, p.152).

The lexis being used here would be problematic in a strictly trans context. If Jess identified as a man or trans man, the use of 'pretend' here would be misgendering and transphobic. However, within the context in which Jess is transitioning at this point in the narrative, Theresa's comment is within reason. The use of 'fugitive' here implies hiding; this not only equates passing with deception, but also highlights another key issue for those who choose to pass, the danger of discovery. Describing this concern, Paris Lees has stated that 'as long as she was keeping [her trans history] a secret, the internalised shame, stress of passing, and fear of being "uncovered" would persist' (Godfrey, 2015). Whilst passing and living as stealth affords cultural capital, it comes with the potential for discovery and punishment. The cissexist linking of passing and deception is based on the belief that the gender assigned at birth is the only truly authentic gender a person has, therefore meaning that a trans person's gender is inferior. However, in a trans context, the deception is that which occurs before

transition, where a person passed as the gender assigned to them at birth rather than expressing their internal sense of self. For Jess, these two readings of deception are combined. Jess, as a butch, is regularly read as failing to convincingly pass as either female or male throughout the narrative; however, actively trying to pass as either would be an act of self-deception or self-erasure. This again highlights how the traditional concept of passing being the ultimate goal for trans people is not universally applicable.

When they are able to pass as a man, Jess feels an initial sense of relief at no longer being as at risk from gendered and/or homophobic violence. However, they quickly come to discover that for them, 'passing didn't just mean slipping below the surface, it meant being buried alive. I was still me on the inside, trapped in there with all my wounds and fears. But I was no longer me on the outside' (Feinberg, 1993, p. 173). In the single story, and indeed in many trans narratives, being able to pass is the point at which someone feels most themselves. However, for Jess, passing is being read as something other than they are. This is an issue that is usually faced by those who have not transitioned. Again, for Jess, this complication is due to their transition being based on something other than a need to embody their authentic identity. Lee Hurley describes his transition as being a way in which to embody his identity in a way that Jess' transition does not. Hurley states:

From my experience and from talking to some other trans guys, we do seem to have it a lot easier. For me, being trans isn't so much a lifetime thing – it's a period I passed through to get from how I was born to where I feel I should be (Godfrey, 2015).

For Jess, this is experienced as a loss of self, a failure of self-recognition. Jess states, echoing Paris Lees' previous point, that they lived in 'the constant terror of discovery' (Feinberg, 1993, p.173) noting that '[a]s far as the world's concerned, I was born the day I began to pass. I have no past, no loved ones, no memories, no me' (Feinberg, 1993, p.213). This is by and large due to a lack of community available to those who live stealth – something that Jess is forced to do in order to survive in a working-class, all-male environment at the factories they are employed at. It is also in keeping with a

time in which transition automatically meant the denial of any previous identity, wherein it was almost imperative that a person's trans status be kept secret and the act of being stealth was nearly universally adopted.

This fear of discovery and the need to remain stealth may be further seen when Jess sleeps with Annie. At the time Jess is passing and has to hide their true identity; living stealth meant that they could not express themselves fully, and that they were therefore unable to discuss the situation with Annie. Instead they present as entirely male, secretly wearing a strap-on; 'I pulled my dildo carefully out of my briefs in the dark, afraid of being discovered. What made me think this could work?' (Feinberg, 1993, p.191). This fear of discovery has moved from being in the public to the private sphere, something that does not occur elsewhere in the novel. This means that Jess is never truly at ease and is always waiting to be found out, which in turn brings the notion of deception back to the fore. The effect of this situation is twofold: Jess does not realize that Annie is virulently homophobic until they meet for the second time, and Jess denies the butch identity that they had always previously claimed. Being a butch had always previously been, and later continues to be, a key aspect of Jess' sexual identity. During the encounter with Annie, Jess still acts as a stone butch in that they engage sexually with the other person without accepting physical reciprocation, although, in this case, the context of Jess' stone butchness is more an act of hiding than an expression of identity. Near the beginning of the narrative it is made clear that 'It's OK if you find a femme you can trust in bed and you want to say that you need something, or you want to be touched' (Feinberg, 1993, p.73). However, in the encounter with Annie this is not possible. As a result of this, Jess foregrounds their desire to pass as male over the potentiality of expressing the full range of their sexuality.

This limitation of Jess' identity and sexuality is based in their need to be read within the binary. This is in line with Bernstein-Sycamore's definition of passing as 'the violence of assimilation' (2006, p.8), in which assimilation means compliance with the cissexism of the norms of the single story narrative. In Jess' case the violence of assimilation is due to the discord between their non-binary identity and their post transition ability to be read as male. As mentioned previously, for Jess, passing means

a denial of their past and who they are. However, as Carroll notes, rather than identifying solely as their post transition gender, it may be politically and personally beneficial to simultaneously identify as transgender: '[b]y identifying *as* transgender, transgender people are not seeking to conceal a prior sexed identity or current cross-gender identification, but to embrace the lived integrity of an identity position as transgendered' (Carroll, 2011, p.249). Jess speaks of wishing to retain their past as a key part of their present self, to cite their personal development within their new social position. Jess chooses to once again embody this history; they halt their 'transition through surgery and hormones to found an embodied transgendered subjectivity' (Prosser, 1998, p.178). Jess' binary transition was a product of fear and the need for safety; their decision to reverse that transition was based on needing to embody a unified and authentic sense of self.

The decision to cease their physical transition and forgo passing allows Jess to 'com[e] home to [their] body', to do 'more than to just barely exist, a stranger always trying to not get involved' (Feinberg, 1993, p.224). Jess states that passing was necessary at the time in order to survive, but that they were now ready to 'define myself [...] to be able to explain my life' (Feinberg, 1993, p.224), indicating a need to reclaim their personal history in order to understand the breadth of their identity. However, this acceptance of self, the decision to stop hormones and cease passing, impacts both their interior and external existence. 'Jess ends up passing neither as a man nor woman *and* being read as both. [They] mak[e] the fantastic transformation to the intermediate space of crossing, [their] lived reality' (Prosser, 1998, p.187). This lived reality, whilst more accurately portraying Jess' sense of self, leaves them once again vulnerable to the readings of others; Jess notes, 'I had gone back to being an *it*' (Feinberg, 1993, p.224). Whilst people of all genders face the possibility of 'failing', of being misread, and there is almost always a gap between identity and how it is socially read, for Jess, in identifying as non-binary in a time before this was in any way intelligible, their risk becomes less one of being 'misread', as it had been when they were passing, and is instead the fact of being actively read and made unviable because of it.

Being read as 'other' opens Jess to transphobia, both through violence and neglect. When they have their jaw broken by a gang who violently question their gender, they

are then unable to attain sufficient medical treatment due to their being 'a gender outlaw' and not having the correct documents (Feinberg, 1993, p.259). This failure by the state and society to understand gender non-conforming identities means that Jess' choice to stop passing has a serious impact on their quality of life. As Paris Lees has stated, '[t]he lives of those who pass and those who don't are very different. I know because I've had both' (in Godfrey, 2015), which Godfrey elucidates upon by noting that 'passing may make public life easier, but the anxiety still remains, simply shifting from a fear of being visibly read as trans to a fear that people will find out' (Godfrey, 2015). Jess, too, experiences both sides of this equation, and, akin to Lees, chooses to forgo passing, which therefore politicises their identity. 'Being out is necessarily difficult for all and impossible for many, yet it is often taken as the measure of transgendered political awareness' (Roen, 2002, p.521). This is expressed in *Stone Butch Blues* towards the end of the narrative where Jess speaks at a gay rally; they state, 'suddenly I felt so sick to death of my own silence that I needed to speak too [...] hear my own voice' (Feinberg, 1993, p.296). This silence may not refer only to their own, but also to that of those who share their non-binary identification, thus highlighting the importance of visibility in the trans community, something that will be discussed in chapter 3. Once they have spoken, Jess states that the applause told them that 'it was possible to still hope' (Feinberg, 1993, p.296), meaning the hope for a society-wide acceptance of all identities, something that is also addressed in the closing pages of the text.

*Stone Butch Blues* is bookended by Jess' introspective reflections. The book opens with them writing a letter to a former lover ruminating on their relationship and experiences; and closes with a dream sequence that summarises the development of Jess' ideas of self that occurred throughout the narrative. The effect of this framing device is to emphasise the key themes within the text. It opens by addressing issues of the false acceptance of non-binary identities by some liberals when Jess writes about a date who had stated that 'she hates this society for what it's done to "women like me" who hate themselves so much they have to look and act like men' (Feinberg, 1993, p.5-6). This places Jess' expression of self as something that is a product of external forces, rather than an expression of internal identification. This assumption is based on a first meeting with Jess and, as such, expresses the perspectives of those who view gender

as strictly binary and can therefore not understand any form of gender mixing. That Feinberg chooses to introduce this on the first page of the novel highlights it as a significant issue, one that is reiterated throughout the text. There is a persistent critique of those in the feminist movement who fail to understand, or outright disregard, trans identities. Jess states in the letter:

We thought we'd won the war of liberation when we embraced the word gay [...] [but] They drove us out, made us feel ashamed of how we looked. They said we were male chauvinist pigs, the enemy. It was women's hearts they broke (Feinberg, 1993, p.11).

This highlights how the divisive strategies of some aspects of second wave feminism affected those for whom 'womanhood' fell outside of the accepted definition and works to reiterate the reasons that trans theory evolved away from feminism. In an interview Feinberg once stated that 'many works of *gender theory* [... are] so abstracted from human experience that [they] lacked meaning' (Peters, 1996). Feinberg noted that they 'wanted to write about trans characters, and how their lives were intersected by race, class, and desire [...] the kind of gender theory that we all live' (Peters, 1996). This reiterates a point I made earlier, that, even within the trans community, there are more accepted, or at least more promoted narratives. However, it should be noted that this interview was conducted in 1996 and that trans theory has since come a long way, moving from more binary transgender/transsexual arguments, as seen in Jay Prosser's *Second Skins* (1998), and has begun focusing more so on lived experience.

The dream-sequence that closes the novel reflects this inclusive gender theory and mirrors the letter that opens the text. In the dream, Jess walks to sit in a hut amongst a crowd of non-binary people:

There were people who were different like me [...] We could all see our reflections in the faces of those who sat in this circle. I looked around. It was hard to say who was a woman, who was a man. Their faces radiated a different kind of beauty than I'd grown up seeing on television or in magazines. It's a

beauty one isn't born with, but must fight to construct at great sacrifice (Feinberg, 1993, p.300).

Jess goes on to speak about their pride at being a part of that group. This closing section reflects many of the same themes as the opening letter; it addresses those identities that do not easily fall within the binary and their treatment within their society. Although the dream is far more positive, the non-binary characters are still in a separate building to those 'women, men and children [who] stood at the edges of the field looking at me, smiling and nodding' (Feinberg, 1993, p.300). The implications of this are twofold; on the one hand, having the 'women, men and children' at the edges suggests that the non-binary identities occupy the centre rather than the periphery, moving them away from the margins that they exit in within a cisnormative society. On the other hand, whilst in this dreamscape attitudes toward non-binary identities are far more positive, they are still distinct, somehow other, from binary identities.

Jess' transition from butch lesbian, to male, to non-binary throughout the narrative is illustrative of a number of key issues, especially regarding passing. It demonstrates the danger of a single story narrative in which transition is only ever binary, and foregrounds the way in which this leads to the invisibility of non-binary identities. This invisibility not only means that the trans people within the text are potentially unaware of the possibility of living outside of the binary, but similarly means that their society is unaware, leading to a distrust of those who do identify as such which results in cissexist and transphobic violence. For Jess, passing was a way of becoming invisible in order to remain safe, but which ultimately led to a personal unhappiness that they saw as a greater disadvantage than being read as trans.

#### **2.4: *Transition to Murder***

Whilst the plot of Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues* is centred around Jess' identity and transition, Renee James' *Transition to Murder* (2012) is instead a crime thriller in which gender is one of the issues. It is narrated by Bobbi Logan, a hairdresser and trans woman who, having previously lived stealth and without publicly transitioning, comes out after a friend of hers is murdered for being trans. She investigates the murder herself, discovers that the killer was her friend's partner, and abducts him with the

intention of killing him. Changing her mind at the last moment, Bobbi leaves him tied up in a garage, where he is later found murdered. The police then begin to question the local trans community about his death and Bobbi notes, '[w]e're pissed off that Chicago's finest stand around and scratch their balls when we get beaten up or murdered, and now when some straight, rich guy gets it you want to accuse one of us' (James, 2012, p.312). Another suspect is later charged with the murder, and the rest of the novel is dedicated to Bobbi's own progress as both a woman and hairdresser, and often features her spending time with the trans community and her counsellor.

The themes of this book very much deal with what it means to be visibly trans in a transphobic society, and how institutions such as the police fail to adequately protect trans people. It is the case that Bobbi's decision to come out and to transition is, in part, due to the institutional transphobia of the police who fail to adequately investigate the murder. She states that it:

makes me really resent having to lie about who I am [...] All because I'm not supposed to be who I am. Because I can pay taxes, obey the law, be good to everyone, and still get murdered because it's okay to kill trannies (James, 2012, p.30).

Although gender and transition are not the sole focus of the novel, trans political themes are still heavily implied throughout the text. Bobbi's use of the word 'having' here indicates the pressure her society puts on trans people to be invisible, to either not transition at all, or to pass and remain stealth so that no one is aware of their trans status. The novel's locus is based on issues of gender and transition, and the crime and investigation upon which the text's plot is based are both trans focussed. Furthermore, the protagonist's character development is explicitly related to her transition, and trans political stances are invoked in discussions held about the police's neglect to adequately investigate the murder and society's treatment of various trans characters. As such, trans themes are prevalent throughout the text, influencing more than one aspect of the novel's structure and development.

Throughout the text Bobbi highlights the fact that she is readably trans, she often mentions her height, the width of her shoulders and, in times of unease, states that she feels like 'a hairy giant in a tutu' (James, 2012, p.20). Fitting with the trope of didacticism in trans fiction, Bobbi's narration is used to describe the physical and emotional changes that can take place during hormone treatment, she notes:

When I'm away from the salon, I live as a woman [...] Months of testosterone blockers and estrogen supplements have given me shapely breasts and softer skin and cause my male genitalia to shrink. Electrolysis has eliminated my social hair and what little body hair continued to grow after I started the hormones. My personality has changed, too. I'm more prone to crying and have less of an edge to my temper (James, 2012, p.8).

Considerations of appearance are a key part of Bobbi's narrative and is something that she regularly focusses on. During the course of the novel Bobbi gradually grows in confidence, moving from wearing androgynous clothing to adopting a range of feminine expression:

When I finally got around to dressing this morning I just had this unstoppable urge to express my femininity. Sometimes that comes out in a conservative long flowing skirt and peasant blouse, sometimes in a miniskirt and net hose. Today it came out in streetwalker garb' (James, 2012, p.293).

This acts to underline both Bobbi's development as a character, but also the narrow notions of gender within which she is forced to operate. Here she highlights that there are different types of feminine expression that have different cultural connotations. This is further emphasised when she states 'I'm dressed like a slut today. Rebellion I guess' while apologising for not wearing something more 'presentable' (James, 2012, p.293, 294). This 'rebellion' is based in her expressing a sexualised femininity within a society that demonises female sexuality, but it may also be read as a rebellion against the cissexist society that devalues her femininity. In a society in which a biologically essentialist binary is enforced, any act of gender play or gender movement is considered an act of rebellion. In showing Bobbi's internal monologue, James is able to

highlight the issues behind and beyond her sartorial choices. Bobbi's use of clothes and her appearance to express herself highlights the importance of embodiment rooted in identity, and in some cases, the way in which passing can be a way of achieving such.

In being 'readably trans' Bobbi does not pass, which is something that she struggles to come to terms with throughout the narrative, largely due to external reactions. She states early on that 'here in America, how you look is a lot more important than who you are' (James, 2012, p.8) and describes how many of her hairdressing clients stop seeing her when she comes out. She takes the time to emphasise that:

I still look more masculine than feminine and would never pass as a woman even in Cinderella's ball gown and formal makeup. What I try to do is present myself as an attractive person, obviously transgender but nice to look at (James, 2012, p.9).

This is an important part of the narrative; for all of her insecurity throughout the text, very early on she highlights that she is not necessarily aiming to be read as cisgender. Whilst she adopts a feminine aesthetic and judges herself by culturally conscripted norms of femininity, she also exemplifies Sandy Stone's notion of the posttranssexual, someone who embraces their entire trans past and their trans identity in their presented gender. In being openly and readably trans Bobbi often faces various forms of transphobia, she loses work and regularly faces violence and disapproval. This emphasises how passing is often a mechanism of safety, a tactic used in order to travel through the world without facing transphobic oppression. However, this mechanism is undone in the murder around which the crime thriller is based, that of trans woman, Mandy. Bobbi states that:

Mandy was the goal for transwomen like me. We think if we can look like that, if we can pass as women and even be admired for our beauty, we'd have it made [...] Her murder crushes that fantasy in a savage way (James, 2012, p.105).

Passing is generally seen to be a promise of safety within the trans community; it is a way of going unnoticed and therefore not inviting the violence that is a constant risk within a transphobic society, however, it also comes with the risk of violent repercussions. This echoes the Gwen Araujo case and Jess' experiences in *Stone Butch Blues*, highlighting the rigid nature of society's perception of gender wherein any form of gender movement or ambiguity is unacceptable. In presenting characters that are and are not read as cis, James highlights the different experiences within the trans community, but also how all trans people are linked by a shared oppression, whether or not they hold passing privilege.

Mandy is used throughout the text as a narrative device to showcase the 'traditional' trans narrative. Her abusive relationship and eventual murder is something that statistics confirm to be an issue within Western society, in which '9 in every 10' trans murders are trans women, of which, 'at least' 16% 'are suspected to have been killed by intimate partners' (HRC, 2018, p.62-63). Furthermore, the narrative of her adolescence is provided in a scene between Bobbi and Mandy's sister. Her sister describes her as always having been 'effeminate', something which her father scolded her for. When she came out as a woman, her father 'issued the age-old proclamation: not in my house [...] Then the ultimatum – dress and act like a boy or get out' (James, 2012, p.83). Having left home, Mandy 'worked as a waitress and a hooker', 'crashed with whoever would take her in', and fell out of touch with her family (James, 2012, p.83). Regarding this, Bobbi states, '[t]here is not much for me to say. Mandy's story is a familiar one' (James, 2012, p.83). As a character, Mandy is rarely given a voice of her own, and is instead used to illustrate a number of key trans tropes, all of which fall into the single story. Mandy knew she was a girl from a young age, she transitions young, she passes, and she experiences violence. She is the silent centre of the novel and is used to show a common narrative of trans existence, against which Bobbi is able to frame her own trans existence and resistance, thus highlighting the diversity of the trans community.

The novel opens with Mandy's murder, told from the killer's perspective, a narrative choice that showcases the way in which middle-class cisgender male voices are often foregrounded above others. The killer, John, is dating Mandy but engages with a

number of transphobic discourses: refusing to be seen with her in public, denying her womanhood, calling her an 'imitation woman', a 'tranny whore'; he contrasts her with 'real women', calls her 'fake' and describes her as a 'thing' (James, 2012, p.1-4). These acts of dehumanisation and gender denial are contrasted with his consistent use of the correct pronouns; although, this seems to be in order to reflect his personal identification as heterosexual rather than her gender identity. Opening the novel with the murder creates immediate tension, but also has the effect of linking transphobia to murder, something that is a regular occurrence within society. Mandy's murderer becomes allegorical for society's transphobia and cissexism. Mandy is made a metaphor for all trans women who face violence. What James does in this text that alters the common narrative surrounding trans murders is refuse to misgender the victim, something that is commonly seen in the media as witnessed in the cases of Keyshia Blige, Jasmine Collins and Tamara Dominguez in 2015; and famously Billy Tipton in 1989 (New York Times, 1989; Stafford, 2015). James avoids objectifying Mandy by maintaining her personhood, alongside a reflection on her life, her personal development and her value as a friend (James, 2012, p.25-27). However, Bobbi still describes her murder as 'a message to all us trannies: no matter where you are, who you are or how good you look, you are not safe. You will never be safe' (James, 2012, p.25). The repetition of the lack of safety trans people face in society highlights to the reader the constant state of peril trans people exist in, and how, even if a trans person conforms to all of society's requirements to look and act in socially recognisable ways, they are still at risk. Further to this, this vulnerability is reinforced by women's vulnerability generally within a patriarchal society. This indicates that, until society evolves beyond cissexism and sexism, 'passing' is a faulty mechanism of safety unless it is accompanied by secrecy, the denial of the past and a subsequent lack of access to community and support structures.

Bobbi makes it clear at the beginning of the text that she is aware that appearance is crucial to if and how a person is accepted by society. In discussing the impact of society's perception of others and her subsequent hesitancy to come out at work, she notes, 'being a full-fledged transsexual is a much more serious offense against humanity than being a cross-dresser, which is just part-time weird, or being gay, which is full-time weird but you look okay to everyone' (James, 2012, p.8). The focus on

'looking okay to everyone' highlights Bobbi's thoughts on passing being a way in which to gain societal acceptance. It also exposes how actions, identity and visibility each have different connotations regarding the way in which they are received. In comparing cross-dressing and being trans, Bobbi highlights how society is less condemning of a person's actions than their identity, and contrasts both to the option to remain stealth. However, describing them as each being different levels of 'weird' also shows how LGBTQIA+ identities are all positioned as 'other', but oppressed to different degrees and in different ways.

Bobbi's concerns about 'not looking okay to everyone' and therefore not being accepted by society is one of the key reasons she initially delayed her transition. Furthermore, it is why, even whilst transitioning, she continues to present as male at work for some time. As Nagoshi, Nagoshi and Brzuzy state that 'people use an individual's physical characteristics [...] to place the target in the most fitting social category [...] all members of a category are stereotyped similarly, despite within-group variations in physical appearance' (2014, p.50). In continuing to present as male at work, Bobbi is hoping to maintain her previous social category and therefore not face any new stereotyping that may lead to subjugation. However, as a result of the hormones she begins to develop breasts. She reaches a point of development whereby it is necessary for her to wear 'a restraining undergarment to work for months, the kind used by female-to-male transsexuals' (James, 2012, p.9). Here Bobbi is taking active steps to retain her ability to pass as male due to the fear that '[she] might lose everything if [she] come[s] out' (James, 2012, p.9). This example highlights the difference between trans and cis contexts of passing; for trans people, passing occurs pre-transition, whereby a false identity is upheld to appease society, whereas from a cis context, passing occurs post-transition, whereby a trans person is seen as trying to convince others of their gender. This example of passing also produces an interesting dichotomy in which Bobbi is trying to pass as different genders according to the social circumstance in which she is situated at the time. Bobbi achieves this by using her understanding of how gender is accorded by external social structures rather than being based on an internal sense of self. She aims to manipulate those people reading her to continue viewing her as existing within their cisnormative, biologically essentialist expectations. Additionally, she describes the binder as being 'horribly

uncomfortable' and that '[she] feel[s] like [she's] mutilating [her]self' (James, 2012, p.9). This is in direct opposition to the way that trans men often describe binders. For example, in Nick Kriger's autobiography *Nina Here Nor There*, binding is described as a time when someone 'looked best and felt most confident' and as being 'comfortable' because 'you can bind and not have them [your breasts] out there. That's comfortable for me' (Krieger, 2011, p.38-39). One of the characters notes that, '[t]he chest is one of the first places people look to for gender [...] And I don't want to be associated with anything feminine' (Krieger, 2011, p.39). Here, the choice to bind is always based in the desire to pass; however, the emotional impact it has is based in embodiment and whether it is enabling it or concealing it.

Chase Strangio notes the 'paradox of hyper visibility and invisibility' of living as a trans man, stating that 'there was something about the liminal gender space that I occupied that invited attention' in which he either passed as male, female or neither/both depending on who was viewing him (2015). This led to inappropriate questions and comments from his co-workers and superiors whereby he was 'serveilled and erased by the powerful in [the] power syste[m]' (Strangio, 2015). This echoes an experience of Bobbi's in which, while at work a customer asks 'are you a tranny? Is that why you look so gay?' (James, 2012, p.7). Not only does the customer make the common mistake of conflating gender and sexuality, but she also highlights how tenuous one's ability to pass can be. Bobbi at this time, whilst identifying as a woman, is still presenting as male whilst in public and yet her ability to pass is still questioned. Additionally, here Bobbi is accused of failing to pass as either gender and instead is labelled 'a tranny', a dehumanising act of refusing Bobbi's admittance to her gender identity as well as denying her the refuge of staying in the closet as her assigned gender. Furthermore, this indicates the widespread perils of failing to fall unquestionably on one side of the binary. It is the case that cis people are not asked to pass as cis, they are allowed to simply be. However, here, whilst Bobbi is technically presenting as her 'cisgender' self, she has mixed enough gender signals that her cisgenderedness is called into question. This failure to embody the polarities of the gender binary indicate that anyone who falls in the middle ground of the binary, even if they are presenting as one particular gender, are still vilified by cisnormative society.

In the spaces in which Bobbi does present as female, she still expresses concern about how this is impacted by context. For example, when arriving at a social gathering she experiences '[n]ausea and panic' (James, 2012, p.13) upon discovering that the friend who had invited her had not yet arrived. This anxiety is caused by the fact that her friend was therefore unable to introduce her to the other guests, stating that being introduced by her friend 'as her hairdresser somehow makes it seem easier to be so flamboyantly strange looking, a man with toned arm muscles and full breasts, wearing women's clothing and makeup' (James, 2012, p.13). As such, her fear is due to an awareness that she is unlikely to pass and the consequent uncertainty of how she will be received. In this scene, Bobbi feels that she can 'excuse' her transness by showcasing her acceptance in non-trans social categories 'friend' and 'hairdresser'. Because she is visibly trans, Bobbi is not afforded the option to divulge her identity only when she feels safe to do so. As such, she attempts to offset any potential repercussions by only presenting as female in spaces in which she feels secure. In this case her security was based on the support of her friend. This scene acts to highlight the importance of the visibility of trans identities, and further implies the need to work towards ensuring that trans people are afforded equal rights and acceptance; without this trans people are at constant risk from transphobia based in lack of understanding and a subsequent lack of acceptance. This is further reiterated when Bobbi notes that some people at the barbeque are 'not sure how to speak to someone so clearly on the fringes of society' (James, 2012, p.14), something that Bobbi was hoping to diminish by being introduced as a hairdresser, which would give her a social status that others can understand, and one that is commonly associated with a level of flamboyance. This also feeds in to issues of intersectionality; Bobbi feels that her social status of 'hairdresser', and employed, would help her gain acceptance. However, had she been unemployed, or a sex worker, or any other further social minority, she may have been considered to be further upon the 'fringes of society' and therefore even less comprehensible to a wider audience.

The issue of intersectionality is key within discussions of trans and relates back to my discussion of the single story narrative. Intersectionality refers to the ways in which 'discourse about identity has to acknowledge how our identities are constructed through the intersection of multiple dimensions' and the way in which each of these

identities have their own levels of privilege and subjugation (Crenshaw, 1991, p.1299). The example used in Crenshaw's foundational essay is the way in which black women are marginalised in both the feminist and black movements as each are white or male focussed respectively. As such black women are marginalised on at least two axes. Within this extract from *Transition to Murder*, and more broadly within this text and others in this thesis, the authors include and highlight issues of gender, class, femininity and social status. This struggle is compounded for trans men of colour, and further again for trans women of colour.

How Bobbi is read and treated by cis people is a recurring theme within the text, she notes 'I get a lot of stares as a trans woman' (James, 2012, p.10) and describes the way in which someone who is 'visibly offended by my presentation' is 'unable to look at me. This is how polite people express disgust at inappropriate people like me' (James, 2012, p.20). After a scene in which Bobbi is shouted at and spat on by a teenager, an act of transphobic violence that is describes as 'a prelude to murder or something like it' (James, 2012, p.80), Bobbi states:

It has been three days since the incident. Everywhere I go I feel like an assault from a stranger is imminent. I have to force myself from the apartment and every moment I'm out I feel like a misfit and a fair target for every thug and right-wing whack job on the street (James, 2012, p.80).

What this scene achieves is to highlight how 'the spitting incident', which 'would just be a bad day' for some, is indicative of a much wider issue for trans people and compounds the multitude of microaggressions they face every day to become a cause of genuine and sustained fear. What this scene allows James to do is highlight to the reader how a judgemental look or cruel comment can have a much larger impact upon a trans person, due to the volume in which they may experience such things. In showcasing Bobbi's vulnerability, James highlights the person behind the gender which may potentially have the impact of humanising trans people to the reader of the novel.

A way in which *Transition to Murder* breaks the single story narrative is through Bobbi's discussion of her uncertainty about transition. In doing so this also highlights

trans theory and politics' acceptance of all gender identities both within and without the binary. She states:

Most people who have transgender feelings don't actually change genders [...]  
In my world, there aren't just two genders. There is a vast universe in between.  
You want to be sure where you are in that puzzle before you start making  
permanent changes (James, 2012, p.9).

This is something echoed by Nick in *Nina Here Nor There* by (Krieger, 2011) who throughout the course of the text slowly moves from identifying as a lesbian, to a butch lesbian, to someone who binds their breasts to achieve a male silhouette, to then wearing a packer – a flaccid penis strap-on – to finally identifying as male and undergoing surgery. The rise of trans politics and its acceptance of a broad range of gender identities means that people are not forced to move from one distinct box to another, and are instead able to experiment with gendered expressions until they discover one that feels authentic. The difference between Krieger and Feinberg's texts highlights the ways in which gender liminality and movement has progressed, at least within liberal trans spaces. While Krieger's protagonist is able to slowly move towards their final gender expression, Jess is forced into a binary transition that they later move away from in order to live authentically as non-binary. This is reflected by Sandy Stone who states that:

Western white male definition[s] of performative gender [...] reinforce a binary, oppositional mode of gender identification. [Trans individuals] go from being unambiguous men, albeit unhappy men, to unambiguous women. There is no territory between (in Epstein and Straub, 1991, p.286).

This highlights the ways in which the trans 'world' that Bobbi mentions differs to the binary nature of the cisgender one. In embracing the potential for a 'universe' of gender identities, Bobbi highlights both a key aspect of trans theory's all-encompassing stance on gender, but also the achievements of trans politics and its promotion of such ideas, purely through mentioning them as a possibility where once there was none.

One of the places that Bobbi feels most safe to live as herself is in a trans support group that she attends, 'TransGender Alliance' (James, 2012, p.22). The group 'takes in the whole transgender spectrum'; however, she does note that:

Female-to-male transsexuals are rare in TGA. They don't need a support group as much as those of us flying the other way do. After a few months on testosterone and maybe a mastectomy, they can pass easily as males and move into the mainstream of society (James, 2012, p.22).

What this scene suggests is that the necessity of support groups is due to a lack of ability to pass and thus being subject to societal scrutiny. Moreover, James uses this scene to further highlight the impact societal pressure can have on a person's decision whether or not to transition. Bobbi's group is largely attended by 'older transgenders – most members are somewhere over forty and some are in their sixties and seventies', which she attributes to the fact that the 'average TGA member is a male-to-female transgender who denied her feminine identity for decades until some incident or just the rising pressure of life made her come out' (James, 2012, p.22). In linking attending a support group to the ability to pass, it is suggested that the support being offered in this instance is more about coping with external pressures rather than internal identity concerns. This highlights why subjective positionality, lived experience and personal identification are key aspects of trans theory, in that each has separate issues and impacts, but both are universal to the trans experience.

Further highlighting how trans existence has evolved over the last several decades, Bobbi goes on to suggest that '[y]ounger trans people who are out no longer really need a support group [...] They can feminise themselves with Internet-purchased hormones, and they live the club life in Boystown, or take refuge on trans-friendly college campuses' (James, 2012, p.22). In suggesting that younger generations, those on college campuses and in bars, are more likely to be welcoming of trans people, Bobbi is used to offer an optimistic perception of the way in which society's acceptance of trans people is improving, even if this acceptance is still based, at least somewhat, on an ability to pass. Bobbi cites that younger trans people do not need support groups because they are able to gain early access to hormones, something

that has additional class/wealth implications, but also means that young trans people are more likely to be read as cisgender. Whilst testosterone, as mentioned, is very quickly effective in masculinising trans men, for trans women, if they have completed a male puberty, oestrogen is not necessarily enough to alter their physicality in a way that enables them to pass. The growth of facial hair, the broadening of bodies and faces, and the lowering of the voice are all traits that require surgery, voice therapy and electrolysis to fully undo. However, if a trans girl has access to hormone blockers that delay puberty, or to female hormones during puberty, these physical traits do not develop, and instead they are able to experience a female puberty, retaining smaller features and a higher voice. This all aids in being read as cisgender, and, consequently, being less likely to face transphobic violence.

During the narrative Bobbi begins to live entirely as herself, coming out at work and ceasing to alter her presentation according to context. She is presented as embracing her history, stating, 'I think no matter how completely I evolve, I will see the world as a trans woman, as someone who has lived half her life as male, then changed genders' (James, 2012, p.229), which is something that echoes Laverne Cox's discussion of passing in which she states, 'I'm a woman. I'm passing as myself, I'm a woman, I'm a black woman, I'm a trans woman' (2015). This monologue also showcases the importance of trans authorship and subjectivity, highlighting the unique perspective of someone who has lived one way and then another. I would suggest that 'passing as yourself' is a key message within *Transition to Murder*, there are a number of non-passing trans women featured as strong, vibrant and likeable characters, something rarely seen in cis-authored narratives, particularly in crime dramas where they are usually the victim or the sex-worker. This evolution of Bobbi's embodiment, and the way in which she interacts with her differently gendered past shows a direct movement away from strictly binary ideas. It also directly invokes trans theoretical and political stances in that it foregrounds lived experience and personal development.

The conscious effort that Bobbi puts into passing as much as she can is repeatedly highlighted during the novel, showing its importance to her characterisation and representation within the text. At one point Bobbi notes, 'I make myself concentrate on moving like a woman, even though I feel like an NFL lineman [...] I focus on my walk.'

It is a learned technique, the product of a lot of observation and practice' (James, 2012, p.21). In highlighting the 'concentration' and 'learned technique', this extract shows the performative aspects of gender presentation and echoes what critic Zachary Nataf describes when he states that during transition, trans individuals:

need to decondition and reconstruct [themselves], get used to the gender specific expectations of others, like male bonding and unwanted sexual attraction and adjust to the gains, losses and new privileges that the transition brings (Nataf, 1996, p.22).

This 'need to decondition' acts to highlight the essentialist nature of society, in which actions are read as explicitly gendered, and as such compels dramatic change in both mental and physical demeanour to be accepted as a particular gender. This is again based on the binary, meaning that those potential privileges that Nataf describes are less likely to exist for non-binary individuals. As Jay Prosser states, '[t]ranssexuality consists in entering into a lengthy, formalised, and normally substantive transition: a correlated set of corporeal, psychic and social changes' (1998, p.4). Bobbi shows a constant awareness of her gendered behaviours and the ways in which the society around her reacts to them, as witnessed in the extract about being introduced to new people.

The 'corporeal, psychic and social' changes that Bobbi has slowly made during her transition are thrown into relief late into the text. Still angry about the failure of the police to catch her friend's murderer, she finds him herself. She makes the decision to follow the person she believes killed Mandy, and in order to do so goes undercover as her previously male self. Bobbi, having dressed in masculine clothes, donned a short wig and a fake moustache and sideburns then practices 'walking in a more masculine manner' (James, 2012, p.244). She states:

As I leave, I'm working on my walk, concentrating on keeping my hips and butt stable, my hands and arms close to my body, taking longer strides. In my mind I'm singing the refrain from "Walk Like a Man" (James, 2012, p.265).

This 'concentration' directly mirrors what she had described previously in the narrative regarding her feminine walk and is again linked to concerns about passing. It also acts to show that by this stage in the narrative, Bobbi has successfully 'deconditioned' herself of any masculine behaviour, to the point that it feels distinctly unnatural. This also highlights the differences in the ways in which cisgender and trans cultures perceive passing. In a cisgender context, Bobbi's feminine walk is considered to be an act of passing; however, in a trans context, it is the masculine walk, that which goes against her identity, that is the act of passing. It is here that she realises that 'I really don't like being perceived as a man by others, even though they accept me, [...] in my little male charade I discover that their acceptance is not nearly as important to me as being me' (James, 2012, p.245). This is a fundamental turning point in the text wherein Bobbi comes to fully accept herself in spite of what she perceives to be her flaws. It additionally acts to expose that passing and subsequent social privilege are not necessarily the ultimate apogee of trans experience, something also seen in *Stone Butch Blues* when Jess stops taking hormones and removes their beard in order to 'explore being a he-she' (Feinberg, 1993, p.222). Instead, Bobbi emphasises how important passing as your authentic self is.

Laverne Cox also states regarding passing as yourself that 'it is important that trans people who do have [passing] privilege have space to identify as trans when they want to on their own terms' (2015). This is where the question of visibility and the single story is re-established. The narrative that states that trans people should aim to pass and that this is the locus of their worth, gives privilege to those who do pass, but also somewhat prohibits them from expressing any level of kinship with those in the community who do not pass by choice or otherwise. Privilege creates a hierarchy, but one that those experiencing the privilege are not necessarily in control of. During Laverne Cox's interview, she stated that when her *Time Magazine* cover came out there were those in the community that questioned whether she was 'bad for the community' because she was 'drop dead gorgeous' and didn't 'represent all trans people' (2015). Passing is shown here to be a double-edged sword; it may keep you safe in wider society, but it may also alienate you from your community, the importance of which will be highlighted in the next chapter.

Within this novel the ability to pass is initially presented as a crucial aspect of Bobbi's decision to delay and then hide her transition. However, the murder that the plot revolves around acts to show how, although passing is often framed as a mechanism of safety within the trans community, it is not a guarantee that a person will not face transphobic violence. Mandy's murder is somewhat presented as a political call to arms, it is a fulcrum around which Bobbi and the other characters within the novel become politically active in order to protest the treatment of trans people within their society. It is also a key part of Bobbi's personal development, it is what provokes Bobbi to come out at work and later, when she is hunting the murderer, what helps her realise that she is happy passing as herself. Passing is shown to be a key concern throughout the text, particularly when achieving social acceptance, the fact that Mandy's looks and her ability to pass did not protect her shocks Bobbi. However, during the course of the narrative, the importance of passing diminishes and is replaced with Bobbi's embodiment and personal development being the focus.

## **2.5: Coda**

Contemporary trans theory and politics embrace passing and crossing in equal measure and believe that hierarchies or privilege should not be allocated according to the achievement or compliance with either. However, it should be acknowledged that in practice, this can work differently between trans communities. By making the concept of passing non-compulsory, the trans movement actively embraces broader concepts of gender alongside more binary embodiments. As discussed in the introduction, trans theory is based in self-definition and embodiment, meaning that all gendered presentations are accepted. However, within different trans communities there may be different hierarchies allocated to certain types of gender expression. For some, crossing is a political choice, aimed at increasing trans visibility and demanding trans rights. For others, passing is a way of fully embodying their identity, or a way in which to gain privilege and safety. In trans theory, it is individual choice that is paramount. However, this individual choice still takes place within a social context in which gender is policed by cissexist norms, which can have the impact on constraining those individual choices in order to live a viable life. The impacts of such restrictions are discussed in greater depth in chapters 3 and 4.

What *Stone Butch Blues* and *Transition to Murder* have highlighted is how passing can be understood, used and embodied in different ways. For Jess, passing meant denying their identity, whereas for Bobbi, passing was an ideal that developed into the embodiment of self-expression. What both texts highlight is the importance of 'passing as yourself', however, they both also show how this can, in the context of a cissexist society, be dangerous.

## Chapter 3: Community, Representation and Visibility

### 3: Introduction

In the previous chapter it was noted that passing and crossing are often read according to social norms and usually only deemed viable when they are culturally intelligible, something that is directly influenced by the level of visibility and representation of that gender presentation. Furthermore, the way in which a trans individual's community assigns capital can also have an impact on that person's decision of whether they wish to aim to pass. The link between visibility and community, then, is a complex one; it is necessary to be visible in order to find a community, but that community may privilege the ability to be invisible. Furthermore, the general visibility of trans people within society has a direct impact on the wider community, as will be discussed in this chapter. What is generically called the trans community is in fact a heterogeneous collection of smaller trans communities. The trans community as a whole refers to the collective discussion of all trans people. Trans communities, however, refer to more specific groups of trans people who are united through the sharing of a specific identity, ideology, political engagement or geographical location, etc. As investigated in chapter 2, the diverse range of identities within the scope of the trans umbrella means that there are often conflicting and oppositional stances within the broader trans community, however, as discussed in the Introduction, this can be overcome by conceptualising the broader community as linked through a shared oppression and united by the political goal of gaining equal rights for all trans people.

In this chapter I argue that the issues of community, representation and visibility are inherently linked on a personal and societal level. Research has shown that it is not necessary to 'meet people to share a community; the connection comes from knowing of each other's existence' and therefore not feeling like 'the only one in the world' (Formby, 2017, p.160). What this indicates is that the representation and visibility of an identity leads to a sense of community for those who share that identity, even if it is not physically accessible. Furthermore, 'the Internet has been a revolutionary tool for the trans community, providing answers to questions that previous generations had no one to ask, as well as robust communities of support' (Cox in Steinmetz, 2014). Online representation, whilst providing a community resource also acts as a source of trans

visibility for those outside of the community. On a societal level, diverse visibility and representation leads to an increase in awareness and acceptance over time, as witnessed by the growing tolerance and representation of homosexuality. It is crucial to note, that both the diversity and positivity of representation have a role in bringing about such social change, as Joshua Gamson notes, 'lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans people *are* highly visible', but it is the way that they are visible that matters (Gamson, 1998, p.21). This chapter focusses on how trans-led visibility and representation improves the cultural acceptance of the full scope of the trans community, contributes to the building of communities, and lessens the violence levelled against minority groups. This is articulated through my development of Butler's notions of intelligibility and viability.

Butler defines cultural intelligibility as being 'understood as that which is produced as a consequence of recognition according to prevailing social norms' (Butler, 2004, p.3), and viability as being 'recognizably human' enough to warrant the 'minimum conditions for a livable life' (Butler, 2004, p.225-226). Therefore, in order to exist in a socially acceptable manner, it is necessary to recognisably engage with cultural norms and expectations. The result of failing to do so is to be denied acceptance and subsequently face oppression for being 'other'. Butler argues that being intelligible can lead to being viable, whilst noting that the limited nature of society's current cultural norms means that there needs to be 'a call to extend the norms that sustain viable life' (Butler, 2004, p.225). Therefore, intelligibility and viability are both predicated on a person's engagement with societal norms. Those who adequately embody those norms will be recognisably human, therefore gaining cultural intelligibility, and as a result will have a culturally viable existence. I argue that, in using the concept of external recognition as the basis for both intelligibility and viability, Butler always places responsibility with the person being read, rather than the culture reading them. Whilst I agree that being culturally intelligible enables a more culturally viable life, and that extending the accepted norms within society would aid this, I also propose a different conception of these terms.

There is a crucial difference between cultural intelligibility and cultural viability. Whilst cultural intelligibility is based in the external readings of a person's identity, cultural

viability is the personal livability of that individual's life. Therefore, whilst intelligibility is concerned with reading someone's gender according to their engagement with social norms, viability focusses on the opposing side of this event, the subjective experience of an individual's life as the result of the norms that are placed upon it. What this definition allows that Butler's does not is subjective positionality. I foreground lived experience over cultural and theoretical ideals. It is possible to be culturally intelligible but not live a culturally viable life. As seen in chapter 2, being culturally intelligible as trans can lead directly to a culturally unviable life and being culturally intelligible as existing within the binary can undo the viability of a non-binary life. Cultural intelligibility is the result of visibility, that is, the awareness that trans people exist; whilst cultural viability is the result of accurate and diverse representation that leads to the understanding that trans people are people. Visibility alone does not guarantee understanding, whereas diverse, trans-led representation is more able to articulate the complexity of trans lived experience and therefore lead to the humanisation of trans people. Trans fiction is a key producer of such multifaceted representation and therefore plays a fundamental role in the political and theoretical goal of improving the lived experience, or cultural viability, of trans lives.

Visibility and representation have the potential to work together to enable both cultural intelligibility and viability through the broadening of social understanding. Although, it should be noted that whilst cultural intelligibility is a means by which to locate the self in wider society, its nature as being an external reading of a person's identity has the potential to inscribe cissexist limitations on the gendered embodiments of trans people. Cinán describes the power of locating the self in 'the undefined spaces between reality and imagination' (2014). They state that cultural intelligibility is not something that they consider to be desirable. Instead they suggest that a lack of intelligibility leads to both creation and separation; the conceptualisation of their body and the acceptance that it will never be accurately read by society:

There is no difficulty in describing cis bodies, but there is also no beauty in the bending. Every time trans people talk about our bodies, we invent language [...] I know that this invented world in which I must live mentally and the real one in

which I must operate physically are not symbiotic. They won't ever be [...] we live in the dissonance' (Cinán, 2014).

Cinán's argument is based on the current application of intelligibility and viability as defined by Butler, in which both processes are external acts of reading and being read. For Butler, intelligibility refers to the ability to be recognised according to prevailing norms, whereas the dissonance Cinán describes is a state of invention that exists outside of prevailing norms. For Cinán this has led to an acceptance that they will never achieve a culturally viable existence and that their identity and existence are not 'symbiotic'. Whilst suggesting a potential for creativity, it also implies a wearied acceptance of the status quo and questions whether cultural intelligibility is truly possible. It argues that being culturally viable means being read within cisgender structures. My definition of viability focusses on the subjective experience of being read and places the responsibility for accurate reading on the majority, therefore making it possible to reframe any failure of recognition as a failure on the behalf of wider society to adequately account for trans possibilities. Diversifying representation and therefore intelligibility and viability makes it possible to maintain Cinán's notion of creation, something that is reflected in the evolving language of the trans community, the invention of pronouns, and the resignifying of existing lexis, as seen in Zimman's 2009 work, whilst also allowing Cinán's mental and real worlds to become symbiotic and enable viability for all trans lives.

Representing a full range of identities is the only way in which to improve the cultural intelligibility, and, therefore, the cultural viability, of all members of all trans communities. Laverne Cox, speaking from the personal perspective of someone who has been a fundamental part of the increase in representation of trans women through her television work, has stated:

I have always been aware that I can never represent all trans people. No one or two or three trans people can. This is why we need diverse media representations of trans folks to multiply trans narratives in the media and depict our beautiful diversities (Cox, 2015).

This is in accordance with my analysis in chapter 2 in which it is noted that in only ever representing a group of people in one particular way, it becomes the only acceptable narrative about them, and as such anyone who does not comply with that particular depiction is considered to be inauthentic. In highlighting the need for diverse representation, Cox is arguing that a repetitive single representation is damaging to the entire community. She emphasises how representation, not just visibility, is crucial. In this thesis, the 'multiplication of trans narratives' may be seen in the diverse range of texts analysed, alongside the use of informally published sources, such as blogs and social media posts. It has become apparent during the development of this thesis that theoretical texts are best used to provide the context and basis of each theme or issue, whilst activist and less formal sources provide perspectives on the impact these have on the everyday lived experience of trans people. One such source is from Riley Alejandro who has foregrounded the necessity of self-identification and expression, something that is directly in line with the beliefs of trans theory, stating:

Let trans people talk and define themselves as they see. Stop focusing on acceptable narratives. [Include] trans people of all spectrums. I think the media has a fixation, a horrible fixation, on trans women and their stories. I don't mean in a good way either. It's a really exploitative and fetishizing one. We need to move away from that (Alejandro, 2015)

Alejandro here explores two issues surrounding the representation of trans people within the media. They first highlight the necessity of increased diversity, particularly through the inclusion of trans-authored narratives within cultural output. Furthermore, they describe the current state of trans representation within the media as limited and dehumanising, particularly to trans women, and, by extension, describe the invisibility of the narratives of trans men. The foregrounding of 'acceptable narratives' is what leads to the single story, and ultimately leads to a lack of intelligibility and viability for those who do not fall within such a narrative. What this series of quotations suggests is that the media's limited focus on the trans community has led to a lack of representation for those who may exist in more diverse and intersectional communities or feel that they have no access to a community at all. This

emphasises a lack of awareness of how the ubiquitous 'trans umbrella' works in practical terms.

This chapter is split into four sections. The first will discuss the trans community and communities. It will consider the importance of community to identity and how this can lead to group-based viability. The second section will analyse notions of representation and viability, how these come together, and how they subsequently impact on trans lives and communities. The latter two sections will each analyse a novel, *Roving Pack* (Lowrey, 2012) and *Otros Valles* (Berrout, n.d.), discussing how each text engages with ideas of community, representation and lived experience. I will also consider the ways in which fiction, particularly that by trans authors, plays an important role in the representation of trans people. These texts have been chosen because they each engage with this chapter's themes in very different ways. *Roving Pack* features a number of different types of community, whilst *Otros Valles* explores the implications of experiencing both a lack of trans community and living within an immigrant community. Both consider issues of representation, and *Otros Valles* in particular, as a self-published novel, highlights how trans writing can have an impact on trans lived experience.

### **3.1: Community**

In his discussion of the trans community, Valentine described the notion of 'transgender' as being 'a way of actively *creating* community' (Valentine, 2007, p.98) and states that 'community exists because people say it does. By [...] attending a transgender support group, or engaging in transgender activism – participants affirm the existence of such a community over the differences and structural inequalities that exist within it' (Valentine, 2007, p.103). This describes active community building, however, as I previously noted, Eleanor Formby's work has shown that community can exist without in-person contact. What Valentine's work does show is the way that 'rather than a pre-existing community, there are a variety of dispersed places which are brought together *by* "transgender" into an idea of community' (Valentine, 2007, p.72). This definition allows for the wide variety of trans existences and communities that can exist under the wider trans umbrella. As noted, 'community' usually refers to the overarching group, for example, the LGBTQIA+ community, or the trans

community, with the 'communities' referring to those smaller groups within the umbrella that are linked by more specific commonalities such as location, political beliefs, or personal interests. Evidence from Formby's 2017 research on LGBT communities has shown that individuals can interact with both the community and communities simultaneously. For the purpose of clarity, I will use the definition 'intra-community/ies' for these smaller groups in order to make the distinction between these and the overarching community more immediately apparent. I have chosen 'intra-' as the prefix as it means 'situated or occurring within' (OED, 2018), whereas using 'sub-community' or 'co-community' implies that they are lesser than, or lacking in, an umbrella community. 'Intra-' does not suggest a hierarchical placement but makes it clear that it exists 'within' another community. The term 'community' will therefore be used in three ways – 1) to refer to the wider trans community, 2) to refer to the more individual trans intra-communities, and 3) to refer to a 'sense of community' experienced by an individual.

When considering how communities form, Formby's participants identified connections between LGBT people 'based on what [they] saw as similarities, together with a belief that this created mutual understanding. This could gloss over degrees of difference and diversity within [...] communities' (Formby, 2017, p.155). This highlights the way in which smaller diverse intra-communities can come together under the wider community as a whole. However, this 'glossing over' also has the potential to 'obscure the specific intersections of classed, raced, geographic, and cultural dimensions of personhood' (Singer in Stryker and Currah, 2014, p.260). For this reason, T. Benjamin Singer suggests that:

the transgender umbrella and its aggregative imaginary is useful in that it enables disparate sexual- and gender-nonconforming people to coalesce for individual and political identification, community mobilization, resource accrual, and the harnessing of social power. But given the potential exclusions and erasures produced by an all-encompassing classificatory practice, a caution remains. Umbrellas should arrive with a disclaimer: *One size does not fit all* (Singer in Stryker and Currah, 2014, p.261, italics in original)

What this highlights, beyond the importance of actively considering issues of intersectionality, is the way in which intra-communities have a specific and important impact within the larger trans community. Because 'one size does not fit all', having a smaller more specific space allows those who may otherwise feel excluded by the norms of the wider community to harness the techniques described above, coalescence, resource and social power accrual, to establish a smaller intra-community that will then have more of a voice to speak to the larger community with, which then has the potential to flow outwards to wider society.

Whilst intra-communities are crucial to ensure all trans people feel that they have a space, it is the larger community that is able to fight for representation within society, something that can be achieved, or aggregated, through the sharing of one fundamental issue within trans existence: oppression. As Formby notes, '[m]any participants suggested that experiences of discrimination and other shared bonds transcended differences within communities' (Formby, 2017, p.166). Formby's data works to reinforce the definition of the trans community used in this thesis as being unified through shared oppression. However, whilst a number of the communities interact harmoniously with one another, there are others, such as the HBS identified (Harry Benjamin Syndrome) groups, mentioned in my previous chapters, who distance themselves from others. This can feed into the insular nature of the trans community leading to a lightening jar of inequality in which internalised societal norms and hierarchies impact on relations between community members. As Nataf notes, '[a]s anywhere in society, the transgender community reflects race and class inequalities, but the microcosm also creates a hierarchy of its own between the categories of transgender' (Nataf, 2006, p.30). Whilst these distinctions and hierarchies may exist, trans theory and politics are more broadly concerned with the entire trans community whilst simultaneously engaging with the separate trans intra-communities.

Speaking on hierarchies, Biyuti Binaohan discusses the importance of intersectional issues of equality within trans communities, stating that 'the current "community" is structured by the exclusion and exploitation of twoc [trans women of colour]' (Binaohan, 2013), and that 'there has been over-representation by middle class+ binary white trans people' (Binaohan, 2013). This echoes criticism levelled at second

wave feminism, which Kimberlé Crenshaw's work on intersectionality (1989) aimed to highlight. Vidal-Ortiz has also discussed the ways in which whiteness and hierarchies impact trans people of colour, noting that:

Constructions of whiteness are geopolitical, hierarchically placed, and structured around class and status [...] In many instances, constructions of gender are about being white, being perceived to be white, or sometimes they are deeply ingrained in perceptions of beauty as white (Vidal-Ortiz in Stryker and Currah, 2014, p.264)

The work of these two scholars highlights some of the structural issues behind passing, in which the default norms of being white and middle class are more likely to be correctly read, but additionally shows the way in which the trans community as a whole is still a product and producer of structural inequalities. Therefore, it is important to locate and account for issues of oppression that exist both within and outside of the trans community and develop ways to tackle them. In understanding how the wider trans community is shaped by structural inequality, the importance of intersectionality is further foregrounded. As Reed notes:

It's important, in advancing our understanding of gender, to be able to discuss these distinctions, nuances and subtleties, to think about what they mean, and to disseminate that discourse beyond the boundaries of our own community and into how our culture as a whole understands and interprets gender (Reed, 2012).

What Reed suggests here is the need to tackle oppression within the community so that any subsequent community-led visibility is as equal as possible. This is in line with Binoahan's statement regarding racism and visibility. It also reflects upon the notion of community norms; if the 'distinctions, nuances and subtleties' of a particular trans community fail to account for anything other than gender identity, there is potential for reiterating other structural inequalities, therefore further disenfranchising those members who face multiple forms of oppression and disallowing them community viability even within their own intra-community. Whilst this is something that is

reflected in many of the novels used in this thesis, it is particularly apparent in the texts chosen for this chapter as both protagonists experience some level of intersectional oppression perpetuated by both wider society and in some cases their own trans intra-community.

The development of multiple specific trans intra-communities is especially important for those whose identity has limited visibility, both within cis culture and the wider trans community. Speaking about another facet of society that has historically experienced this, Queen and Schimel describe queer culture, noting that:

Queers have a special aloneness in addition to this universal isolation [no one can truly share your experience]: our difference from the cultural mainstream, and our general absence from the world and worldviews in which we grow up and live. Hence it is especially important to create space for ourselves in the world and the culture to feel connected through the names we give our communities (Queen and Schimel, 1997, p.23).

This absence from world views may be directly related to issues of cultural intelligibility and Cinán's notion of existing within the dissonance between invention and reality. Such dissonance may be reduced within community spaces in which a particular world view or lived experience is shared. I suggest that there is a community-based sense of intelligibility and viability, in which each individual is read according to more specific norms, contextual to each intra-community. This may be seen in Roen's study wherein some members of a local trans support group felt like certain members were not holding themselves to the standard of the group and were therefore lessening the value of the group as a whole (Roen, 2002). It may also be witnessed in a number of the fictional texts used within this thesis, for example through Bobbi's choice to present differently at work than at home due to wider cultural pressures in *Transition to Murder* (James, 2012); and in the treatment of Teddy in *Refuse*, in which the other members of her support group find her to be strange (DeLine, 2009). This lack of assimilation into a particular group may be overcome with further diversification within the available intra-communities. For example, in *Refuse*, Dean bonds with Teddy through their shared understanding of

passing; however, he also bonds with others in the group through shared experiences as trans men (DeLine, 2009). There is an established link between cultural acceptance and personal wellbeing, therefore, those who do not attain cultural viability from cissexist society are more at risk both physically and mentally than those who do. As such, community is particularly important for those who fall outside of cisnormative society's accepted identity norms, and community-based viability becomes crucial in order to offset the lack of cultural viability. Furthermore, this acts to highlight the separation of theory and lived experience. Cinán's notion of dissonance as a ground for creation, whilst being theoretically valuable, does not acknowledge how dissonance may be harmful when experienced on a daily basis.

Even so, an area in which dissonance-led creativity has been beneficial is in the creation of new language, such as pronouns or identity descriptions. As the language of the trans community develops, a greater number of more specifically defined trans identities are being acknowledged. Smaller identity-specific intra-communities are developing within the broader community alongside those intra-communities that form according to specific social, political, locational, and/or contextual commonalities. Such identity-based intra-communities allow people to engage with others who more closely share their own experiences, bypassing issues such as 'not feeling trans enough' (GI, 2018). The simultaneous acknowledgement of the trans community as a whole united against oppression, and the creation of specific intra-communities according to shared identities and contexts engages with the subjective, identity and experience-based stance of trans theory and politics. However, whilst this diversification ensures that a wider range of individuals are able to identify with a community, the diversity itself can lead to confusion. As Erickson-Schroth has noted:

We find ourselves frequently creating and changing the terminology that best fits or describes who we are. These changes can, at times, create complications inside and outside our communities. Factors such as culture, location, and class sometimes mean we do not all agree. But our communities work to honour and respect everyone's self-identification (Erickson-Schroth, 2014, p.3).

Here the importance of the diverse intra-communities is made clear, in that they are better able to account for the full range of contextual complexities experienced by trans people, but also emphasises the importance of addressing the community as a whole. Whilst the more specific intra-communities are able to account for more individualised issues, the wider community has the ability to address broader political concerns and directly tackle larger issues of structural inequality. As such, the prioritisation of individual identity and lived experience within trans theory acts to overshadow any issues of differing terminology. Furthermore, whilst the evolution of terminology may cause moments of confusion, its importance may be conceptualised by understanding that, '[i]t is through identification with and differentiation from others that individuals are able to establish their sense of self [...] a sense of self is inherently connected to one's sense of belonging within a community (-ies)' (Koole, 2010, p.241). This suggests that a person's ability to locate themselves within an identity category is initially a product of visibility but becomes solidified and specified through community interaction. The more diverse intra-communities there are available, the more likelihood there is of a person being able to find a space in which they may attain external validation.

### **3.2: Representation and Visibility**

Arguably, all representation of trans people raises the visibility of the trans community, but, depending on the context, the impact of those representations may differ. Representations that are confined by and reinforce structural inequalities are potentially worse than having no representation at all. This has been an important area of discussion regarding the creative industries such as film, media, and publishing. Between 2002 and 2016, GLAAD (formerly the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) catalogued and analysed over 100 television episodes that featured trans characters and found that they were the 'victim' 'at least 40% of the time', the 'villain' 'at least 21%' of the time and were depicted as sex workers 20% of the time (GLAAD, n.d.). Furthermore, over 60% of the collected episodes featured '[a]nti-transgender slurs, language and dialogue' (GLAAD, n.d.). This alongside the casting of cis male actors to play trans women and vice versa, which reinforces the idea that all trans women are really men, and trans men really women, leads to negative cultural associations regarding trans identities, which then acts to negatively impact trans lives.

Rebecca Mallett and Katherine Runswick-Cole have discussed why cultural representations of oppressed groups have such an impact in relation to representing disability, stating:

as a consumer of a cultural text we do not have access to pure, neutral, untainted “fact,” and therefore texts should not be thought of as presenting “the truth” [...] the term “representation” is often used to highlight how topics and issues are re-presented and mediated through dominant collective beliefs, attitudes and values. It is because cultural texts re-present reality within a shared context that they are so useful for understanding how disability is thought about in wider society (Mallett and Runswick-Cole, 2014, p.48)

Whilst cultural texts do not directly stand for reality, they do present a vision of reality that is mediated or impacted by societal understandings of the topic they are describing. As Mallett and Runswick-Cole state above, no text is neutral. All texts have a purpose and an effect. However, these two things may not be intentionally linked. An author may simply intend to write for art or entertainment, but the text may reinforce damaging norms and stereotypes. The unconscious reproduction of social prejudice is the focus of much identity-based literary criticism, it has been the work of feminist, queer, and critical race theory, as well as disability studies to contextualise such prejudice in the cultural norms that produced them. In concurrence with this, the study of mitigating narratives has also been crucial to the articulation of intersectional potential within literature and, potentially, in witnessing less visible identities within the culture in which the text was produced. David Getsy states that ‘[t]ransgender epistemologies and theoretical models fundamentally remap the study of human cultures. Their recognition of the mutable and multiple conditions of the apparatus we know as gender has wide-ranging consequences’ (Getsy in Stryker and Currah, 2014, p.48), which, I argue, is also the case with trans fiction. In being produced from an epistemological position in which gender is ‘mutable and multiple’, trans authors are more able to construct narratives that in being influenced by their own lived experience and relationship with cultural and community norms have the potential to ‘remap’ representations of trans characters and establish new possibilities within fiction.

It should be noted, that although they remap the representation of trans characters in fiction, trans authors rarely attain the same level of visibility when they represent trans characters as cis authors who do the same. This may be witnessed in the lack of trans authors being formally published compared to cis authors writing about trans characters and is the reason for my use of self-published novels within this thesis. This could be due to representation being largely confined by the structural inequalities of society. Being formally published requires cultural, and often financial, capital, necessitating an agent, editor and publisher. Renee James discussed her struggle to be formally published, noting that ‘much of this agent and publisher stuff gets done through networking’, however, she also ‘spent \$10,000 to self-publish my first book [...] half or more of that sum total went to editing’ (in Kellaway, 2014). What this indicates is that all aspects of publishing require some form of capital and is therefore only accessible to those with a level of privilege, something that is often only available to those trans people who do gain adequate levels of visibility in society. As discussed in chapter 2, cultural intelligibility is usually only given to those who are able, or desire, to engage with cultural norms, particularly beauty norms.

Although increased trans visibility and increased cis awareness may be two sides of the same coin, I believe that it is important to frame such a stance in a way that locates responsibility with society rather than the individual, as they are the ones that suffer due to society’s lack of understanding. Willy Wilkinson, a Lambda Literary award-winning critic, describes how lack of trans awareness leads directly to negative impact on trans lived experience. As he has stated:

As an outcome of the lack of cultural competency about transgender and gender-nonconforming populations, transgender people have experienced significant barriers to full access in many spheres of society and have consequently experienced discrimination, harassment, and violence (Wilkinson in Stryker and Currah, 2014, p.68).

In order to attain this ‘cultural competency’, or using the terminology of this thesis, cultural intelligibility, society requires equal, sustained and diverse representation

of trans people. As discussed in the introduction to this thesis, fiction has the power to provide such representation in a way that is both highly effective and relatively low in risk to trans individuals. Representation and visibility is only the first step in the attainment of true intelligibility and viability. As previously noted, 'a narrative can help us learn to empathise with types of individuals with whom we have no personal experience (Mar and Oatley 2008, p.181), but:

Transgender cultural competency requires recognition and commitment to genuinely understanding and working to address the multiple parameters that impact so many transgender lives. Within this framework of intersectionality, transgender cultural competency involves an understanding of terms, identities, and concepts associated with transgender and gender-nonconforming communities, including utilizing culturally appropriate language and behaviour for addressing and working with transgender populations (Wilkinson in Stryker and Currah, 2014, p.69).

The need for 'commitment' to 'working with' trans people described by Wilkinson here is a crucial aspect of the fight for trans equality. Concerns of visibility are not unique to the recent surge in media interest regarding trans people, it has occurred repeatedly for many decades, not least of all witnessed regarding Lili Elbe, and formally discussed by Sandy Stone. However, whilst increased visibility is a key component of the campaign to improve trans lives, this visibility must be trans-led and needs to account for the potential backlash it may evoke. Janet Mock has discussed the history of monolithic media narratives that have not worked towards 'cultural competency', but instead sensationalised trans lives:

The U.S. media's shallow lens dates back to 1952, when Christine Jorgensen became the media's first "sex change" darling, breaking barriers and setting the tone for how our stories are told. These stories, though vital to culture change and our own sense of recognition, rarely report on the barriers that make it nearly impossible for trans women, specifically those of color and those from low-income communities, to lead thriving lives. They're tried-and-true transition stories tailored to the cis gaze (Mock, 2014, p.255).

Like Wilkinson, Mock foregrounds the importance of representation in both wider culture and within the trans community and emphasises the issue of intersectionality within the trans community and how those who experience overlapping subjugation are even more explicitly absent from cultural representation. Furthermore, she emphasises the historical precedent of the trends in trans representation, and the lack of progress that has been made by wider society with regard to its understanding and interest in trans lives. Any trans narratives that are framed outside of the focus of the cis gaze become invisible. Having 'acceptable trans narratives', those that fit the single story of the cis gaze, enables culture to argue that it accepts trans people without the compunction of having to work at being more inclusive. The cis gaze is a mechanism by which the intelligibility of a trans person is judged. It is akin to Laura Mulvey's 'male gaze' and refers to 'the ways in which trans\* bodies are (both viewed and policed) by cisgender bodies' (Lourenco, 2014). In daily lived experience, the cis gaze exists in gendered assumptions, misgendering, and fears surrounding which bathroom is least dangerous to use. The cis gaze may be reduced to cisnormative assumptions of gender being read onto trans lives, with any divergence from essentialist binary assumptions being viewed as failure.

Mock has also discussed the way in which attaining visibility is not always a positive thing, and highlights the impact of media representation in particular on this, stating that '[t]he media's insatiable appetite for transsexual women's bodies contributes to the systematic othering of trans women as modern-day freak shows, portrayals that validate and feed society's dismissal of trans women as less than human' (Mock, 2014, p.255). She links media portrayals to cultural understanding, highlighting the role representation plays in cultural intelligibility. Media focus on trans people's bodies, rather than their subjective experience, feeds into the enforcement of damaging biologically essentialist and cissexist assumptions. This treatment of subject as object leads to their dehumanisation and, as chapter four explores, subsequent transphobic violence. Similarly, activist, Jetta Rae, has noted that:

For many, simply leaving the house is adequate activism [...] mere visibility in a society built around your exclusion can be dangerous [...] by being out in public,

I become a singular point in spacetime for any and everyone's prejudices, anxieties, and even desires for people like me and what I represent' (Rae, 2015).

Rae, like Mock, highlights the more individual aspect of visibility. Whilst increased visibility and representation in the media is a key aspect of improving the acceptance of trans people, individual visibility holds the potential for violence, as chapter 4 will explore. Due to the potential danger of individual visibility, the importance of representation in cultural output is made clear. Having accurate and diverse representations of trans lives on television, in films and within literature is arguably a fundamentally important aspect of improving the cultural viability of trans lives. As Lee and Kwan (2014, p.123) note, the underlying structures that enable transphobic violence must be tackled both legally and culturally, citing media output as a key source of the representational mechanisms through which to achieve this. This is especially important for those identities that face the most prejudice.

Lack of representation can directly lead to a lack of cultural intelligibility. Tania, a participant in Roen's 2002 study of non-binary genders, highlights this by discussing the current disparity between gender presentation and gendered readings. They state that, although they are non-binary, in society 'there is no transgender option. For them [cisnormative society] there are just the two choices. But for me there is a private third choice, and that's a combination of the two' (p.514). The lack of a visible 'transgender option' means that they are consistently misread as a gender they do not explicitly identify with. Alejandro further suggests that this failure of accurate reading is due to a fundamental lack of visibility, stating:

very rarely do you see NB [non-binary] people in the media, if at all. So one of the reasons [trans is misunderstood] is that the media is creating this self-fulfilling issue of just constantly feeding themselves these incorrect ideas and repeated narratives (Alejandro, 2015).

As such, the lack of adequate representation, and the resultant reliance on binary focussed visibility leads to ineffectual intelligibility and subsequent failure of viability.

This is important because it emphasises the need for all trans identities to be made visible. Alejandro's focus on narratives also emphasises the important role that trans fiction can play in readdressing such misunderstandings. Presenting a similar argument, Mallett and Cole state that 'cultural texts [...] are said to influence the society in which they are consumed. Therefore [...] alternative representations might encourage more inclusive attitudes', going on to suggest that because of this 'it could be argued that this area should be at the forefront of activism and disability rights campaigning' (Mallett and Runswick-Cole, 2014, p.48). The diversification of representation is one way in which to expand the borders of gendered cultural intelligibility, and to fight for the viability of all gender identities. Doing so would aid in dismantling the rigid norms that are the basis for much transphobic oppression.

Describing how a lack of intelligibility can affect non-binary people's lives, UK based activists Fox Fisher and Owl (Ugla Stefanía) have stated:

Being non-binary is very complicated because your very being is in itself a political statement as well as being a personal experience. In a world that is so fixated on two genders and two sexes, you simply don't get to exist in a way [...] we need to start challenging and questioning [the constant binary of sex and gender] more actively and push for legal rights and access to health care for non-binary people (Ditch the Label, 2016).

It is the case here that the personal is very much the political, an issue that identity-based theories and politics have long argued. As a somewhat invisible and even more misunderstood section of the trans community, non-binary identities magnify the issues faced by the trans community in general. Owl and Fox's work emphasises the lived experience of non-binary people and highlights the personal and political importance of attaining visibility and intelligibility. Trans fiction is something that allows these identities to 'exist' on their own terms, and can, as a result, work towards improving the representation of trans people's narratives.

Alongside the lack of non-binary visibility, it is also interesting to note the disparity between the visibility of trans women and trans men. In 1996 Nataf stated that '[o]nly

recently has the existence of female-to-male (FTM) transsexuals been recognised by the popular media' (p.9). Whilst trans men have always existed alongside trans women, it is the case that they have rarely attained as much visibility in their respective times. For example, Reed Erickson and Billy Tipton were not, and are not, as well known as Lili Elbe and Christine Jorgensen. It is often the case that discussions about trans masculinity are subsumed within discussions of sexuality, as witnessed by the "butch/FTM border wars" [that] have played out over the status of Radclyffe Hall's realist novel *The Well of Loneliness*, which is variably claimed as the object of lesbian, transgender and transsexual studies' (Coffman, 2010). Considering why it is trans men are less visible than trans women, Erickson-Schroth states that:

Historically, estimates have generally stated that there are many more trans women than trans men, and some theories have suggested that people who are assigned female at birth transition less because there is greater social acceptance for manoeuvring with more masculine expression (Erickson-Schroth, 2014, p.5).

This suggests that trans men are less visible because they transition less than trans women. However, trans actor and model Jake Graff notes that 'there has certainly been a huge lack of resources and community for trans men', 'I remember when I first transitioned, people kept saying to me "don't be the trans actor, don't be the trans writer", as they felt that that would limit and pigeon hole me', which he states 'was almost like going back in the closet. I bemoaned the lack of trans male representation in the media, whilst hiding behind closed doors' (Hinde, 2015). As such, Graf counter suggests that that lack of trans man visibility is due to a lack of community, something presumably caused at least somewhat by the suggested closeting of trans male identity. As discussed in chapter 2, due to the aesthetic changes brought about by testosterone, it is generally the case that trans men find it easier to be read as cis than trans women. Whilst passing privilege means that many trans men have access to both cultural intelligibility and cultural viability, it also has the potential effect of restricting their access to a trans community, meaning that they are denied support specific to their lived experience. As Koole notes, '[s]ocialisation within communities results in its members acquiring a sense of shared history, purpose, norms, hierarchy, ritual,

belonging and continuity' (Koole, 2010, p.242). It is also important to note that within this thesis there is a lack of fiction by trans men, with Elliott DeLine being the only author that explicitly identifies as such. Leslie Feinberg and Rae Spoon each prefer/red non-binary pronouns, and Sassafrass Lowrey describes themselves as genderqueer; all of the other authors within this thesis are trans women. The genres of autobiography and poetry feature more trans men, for example, Thomas Beatie (2009) and Nick Krieger (2011) have each published autobiographies, and people such as Kit Yan, Eli Clare, Ching-In Chen and Christian Lovehall (aka WORDZ) all feature on the poetry scene. I cannot adequately account for the differential in trans women and trans men publishing fiction, but I do think that it is worthy of note as it adds to the lack of trans man representation and visibility in society.

The above examples regarding the representation of non-binary individuals and trans men provides an example of the least visible members of the trans community and emphasise how the media's monolithic narratives means that it is often the case that trans people are judged against cis understanding of both gender and trans narratives, meaning that if they do not exist within the limited and binary notions of trans/gender, the cis gaze judges them as inauthentic or problematic. As Hines notes, '[d]ebates about (trans) gendered authenticity are also unhelpful in accounting for identities which are consciously constructed on the borderlands of gender' (Hines, 2006, p.51). The single narrative of trans that is viewed as the most authentic by the cis gaze is very much focussed on binary transition, particularly surgical transition. However, as Mock states, this is not the story of transition within trans culture, she argues that:

What I want people to realize is that "transitioning" is not the end of the journey. Yes, it's an integral part of revealing who we are to ourselves and the world, but there's much life afterward. These stories earn us visibility but fail at reporting on what our lives are like beyond our bodies, hormones, surgeries, birth names, and before-and-after photos (Mock, 2014, p.255).

Mock's statement that visibility is not enough to adequately humanise the trans community highlights the necessity of diverse representation within the consideration of visibility as a whole. Reducing trans people to the story of their transition

pathologises their identity; it reduces them to their physical, medical or sartorial choices and denies them cultural viability. Mock further suggests that it is not only diversity of identity that must be included, but also diversity of trans narratives more broadly. She highlights the necessity of looking at different stages of trans lives, not just transition, in order to emphasise the subjectivity of trans individuals. Doing so would prevent society viewing trans people as mere objects of physical transition. In focussing instead on lived experience and personal identification the entirety of a trans person's narrative is given credence. However, what both the media and, in this case Mock, presuppose is that transition will always be part of a trans person's narrative. Whilst Mock reflects upon the media's limitation of trans identities, she does the same herself. Her use of 'integral' as a description for transition 'revealing' identity precludes those who do not actively transition, or those who cannot. Whilst she may be conceptualising transition as a personal shifting of identity conception, the word transition refers to an explicit movement from one state to another, and within the trans context, 'transition' often implies physical intervention. The suggestion that transition is 'integral' to the revelation of self locates Mock within a single story stance. In doing so, she highlights the necessity of increased representation, and that some perspectives are neglected even within the trans community.

Laverne Cox has also worked to expose the interrelation between visibility and social viability and how representation leads to humanisation. Cox was the first trans woman to be featured on the cover of TIME Magazine, in an issue called 'The Transgender Tipping Point'. She used the opportunity to describe the impact of representation, stating:

"We are in a place now [...] where more and more trans people want to come forward and say, 'This is who I am.' And more trans people are willing to tell their stories. More of us are living visibly and pursuing our dreams visibly, so people can say, 'Oh yeah, I know someone who is trans.' When people have points of reference that are humanizing, that demystifies difference" (Cox in Steinmetz, 2014).

By foregrounding this statement with 'we are in a place now', Cox highlights the socio-cultural developments that have needed to take place for this choice of visibility to be an option for trans people. As Whittle has stated, '25 years ago [...] the only way to survive as a transsexual person was to be as secretive as possible about one's past role in life' (Whittle, 2000, p.2), whereas the slow evolution of trans rights since then has meant that some trans people have begun to feel more able to live openly.

Each of the texts analysed in the next two sections feature less privileged protagonists who experience different levels of community engagement, but who also each showcase positive and negative effects of intra-community viability. For example, Click in *Roving Pack* (Lowrey, 2012) has a great deal of interaction with a specific trans and queer intra-community. As a result of this they gain a great deal of support, but also has their gender expression somewhat moulded to fit the accepted narrative of that intra-community. Mira in *Otros Valles* (Berrout, n.d.) on the other hand, has very little contact with the trans community and is able to express an individually defined identity, but also struggles from a lack of support from those who may understand her experience. Each text has been chosen specifically to highlight the different ways in which trans community and visibility issues may affect a narrative of lived experience.

### **3.3: *Roving Pack***

*Roving Pack* (2012) by Sassafras Lowrey follows the homeless Click, a masculine, non-binary teenager as they work with the Queer Youth Resource Centre (QYRC) and try to build a life and family for themselves. Click injects testosterone, dresses in a masculine fashion, and regularly wears a binder to make their chest flat, however, when describing themselves, Click states 'I don't want to be a man [...] I want to be something outside of the binary' (Lowrey, 2012, p. 338). As such, Click uses gender neutral pronouns, such as 'ze', 'hir' and 'they', which will be reflected throughout this analysis. Through Click's narration, *Roving Pack's* community-focus lays with a very specific group of trans and queer 'gutter punk' teenagers. Although they are an active member of this intra-community, Click still expresses occasional feelings of isolation or of being misread:

I keep trying to get everyone to use the right pronouns (ze/hir) for me and to understand that I'm not a fucking man. I don't know why it's so hard for everyone. I'm so sick of having to explain that I'm more complicated than I look (Lowrey, 2012, p.347).

Stating that they are 'more complicated than they look' implies that Click is read as existing within the binary, they are read as a man even though they have stated that they are not. The need to repeatedly 'explain' their identity is a result of a lack of awareness of non-binary possibilities, even within their own trans intra-community. This quotation also highlights the potential discrepancies between intelligibility and viability. Click is intelligible as trans, specifically a trans man, but their life is not made viable as a result of this intelligibility because it incorrectly assigns them as existing within the binary. Lowrey's choice to make the narrator non-binary allows readers to circumvent the same binary assumption and instead comprehend Click's identity from their own perspective and from their own lived experience.

*Roving Pack* is bookended by interactions in which Click's identity is misunderstood, devalued or discredited. It opens with a scene in which Click struggles with which bathroom to use in light of being surveilled by security and closes with them being rejected by their community and their brother, Buck, due to their decision to stop taking testosterone. Click tells them that 'I'd always be trans, this just wasn't my path [...] I was genderqueer' (Lowrey, 2012, p.353). Another person, Travis, tells Click that it is the intra-community's opinion that Click 'wasn't really trans and [they'd] just been appropriating their experience' (Lowrey, 2012, p.352). Click's decision to stop testosterone in order to better embody their genderqueer identity leads to the loss of the community, an event that is the result of a lack of understanding of non-binary identities within that community. In using Click as the protagonist and narrator, what this novel does, especially considering its less than happy ending, is highlight to the reader that non-binary genderqueer identities exist, that trans people face a range of personal and institutional violence, and that community is of fundamental importance to the cultural viability and lived experience of trans people. As Click states, '[t]his is my community. I gave up everything for this' (Lowrey, 2012, p.352).

Lowrey uses this novel to highlight institutional failings regarding trans awareness and the treatment of trans people. This is perhaps best illustrated in a scene in which Click and their trans partner Hunter are crossing the border from Canada into America. The border guards upon seeing their IDs take them into separate interview rooms; 'I think they thought I was maybe an identity thief or something. They kept saying I didn't look like a man and I kept trying to explain what transgender means' (Lowrey, 2012, p.204). The guards' lack of awareness of trans contexts means that Click's identity is repeatedly questioned and held in doubt. This also highlights how biological essentialism, passing and visibility are linked, in that a lack of trans visibility leads to the assumption of essentialist embodiment and the mis-reading of a person's gender due to the application of gendered norms of appearance. This failure of intelligibility means that Click is subsequently denied viability, their identity is judged to be false and their validity as an accepted member of society is refuted. The boarder guards' reading of Click and Hunter's identities as an attempt at deception echoes the validation of the trans panic defence in court, which will be further discussed in the next chapter. However, it also highlights how visibility is directly related to intelligibility. The guard's lack of any cultural reference from which to understand trans identities, particularly, as Graf argued previously, trans male identities, leads to an inability to view the trans people they come into contact with as intelligible. Any lack of intelligibility is the result of a limitation of the norms expressed within a society, something that is often the result of limited visibility and representation. The intelligibility struggle that Click faces is similarly experienced in other less formal cis-dominant settings. When at a public poetry reading, Click states that '[w]hen the guy read my name off the signup sheet he looked all confused like he didn't realise Click was an actual name or something. These were totally not my kind of people' and goes on to note that '[p]eople sorta clapped for me, but you could tell they were damn uncomfortable' (Lowrey, 2012, p.341). Click therefore highlights the strata of intelligibility that a person can face across the multiple communities with which they interact. This also emphasises the importance of wider trans community acceptance of all trans identities and the need for the perpetual broadening of intelligible norms across all aspects of society.

Whilst not being perfect, Click's particular intra-community is shown to be a vitally important space that often functions as the only support network available to those who attend. Describing the group, Click states that '[a]ll we really have is each other' (Lowrey, 2012, p.104), emphasising their lack of familial and societal support and acceptance. For Click, their trans intra-community is their family; they refer to their closest friend within the intra-community as their 'brother' (Lowrey, 2012, p. 13) and refer to the QYRC as their 'home' (Lowrey, 2012, p. 14). During their time at high school, Click would have to 'take the bus a couple of hours to get to Portland and come to the QYRC' (Lowrey, 2012, p. 103), which highlights not only the importance of the group in Click's life that they are willing to travel that far, but also the lack of resources available to the trans community in the text that it is necessary for them to do so. Through this description, Lowrey highlights the importance of community spaces that enable trans individuals to find or form support networks that would otherwise be unavailable to them within a society that often denies their cultural viability.

Whilst the QYRC is predominantly a supportive setting, it also features a hierarchy stratified according to structural inequality. This is witnessed when Click discusses the different social groups within the QYRC, noting a separation between the 'street punks' and the 'GSA [Gay Straight Alliance] kids' (Lowrey, 2012, p.22). The street punks are those like Click who are homeless or with unsupportive families, who rely on donated food and 'don't have mothers', whereas the GSA kids are more socially privileged students whose 'parents always drive them to and from QYRC so they don't have to take the bus', and who 'turn up with big steaming takeout boxes' (Lowrey, 2012, p.22). As such, there is an obvious class divide between those with family support and money, and those without. Class is a recurring motif throughout this text. Being a member of the underclass is a defining feature of Click's life and influences many of the issues Click faces within the text. Click notes that 'jobs are hard to come by when you look like me' (Lowrey, 2012, p.72), linking their financial status throughout the text to their queer identity. Click is forced to leave their childhood home due to domestic violence (Lowrey, 2012, p.17), and is subsequently evicted from other places of residence when the owners find out they're queer (p.18). Click also loses work due to their identity, with one employer stating that 'she shouldn't have taken a chance with me. She said I was going to die in the gutter like all of my fucked

up dyke friends' (Lowrey, 2012, p.62). The use of the term 'dyke' here suggests the common conflation of gender and sexuality and in this context seems to have been specifically chosen to give offence. What these issues within the text depict is a circle of intersectional oppression. It is through this oppression that the importance of community is shown, Click notes that '[e]ven when things have been really bad I've been able to couch surf', something that Click reciprocates when they have housing and others do not (Lowrey, 2012, p.73).

Alongside identifying within the trans and queer communities, Click is also involved with and identifies with the BDSM community. It is a crucial part of Click's community identification and even a part of their choice of name. The name 'Click' is derived from positive reinforcement dog training methods and they choose it as 'this subtle leather thing about how I'm looking for someone to take me down and train me and keep me' (Lowrey, 2012, p.19-20). However, on occasion, being a part of the BDSM community separates them from other members of the queer community. For example, Click describes a QYRC meeting, stating:

The event was boring, mostly just people talking about how to better communicate to other people in the community about the dangers of censorship and book banning, but nothing about why it's not ok to be hating on us as Leather folks (Lowrey, 2012, p.134).

BDSM is one of the most policed aspects of sexuality alongside LGBTQIA+, in this scene Click wishes to highlight the real implications that censorship has on the BDSM community but is faced with an event that discusses censorship in the abstract. The effect of this is that the social prejudices that fuel such censorship remain invisible. This also acts to show how voices of lesser acknowledged lived experiences can highlight issues that would otherwise be inaccessible. This quotation also indicates that, within the text, some intra-communities are given less credence than others, particularly in this case, those who take part in the Leather BDSM community. This is an issue that Brynn Tannehill, an activist and journalist, has observed within our own society, noting that, in spite of the new focus on intersectionality there are still 'acceptable trans narratives' and narratives that are silenced even within the trans

community (2015). The fact that in the text Click's intra-community still fails to adequately acknowledge or support an aspect of their identity works to reinforce my previous supposition that a diversification of intra-communities would allow for more specific support. Although a 'leather folk', 'masculine non-binary', 'gutter punk' specific intra-community may be difficult to find, the notion that such a group could be possible could help to alleviate a sense of isolation. Furthermore, making such an intra-community visible would allow others who share some or all of these qualities to find a sense of viability. In making this visible within the text, *Roving Pack* acts to illustrate and humanise not only trans identities, but those who face other intersections of oppression also, such as homeless youths and those that take place in BDSM lifestyles. Tannehill discusses non-binary individuals, trans BDSM participants, and late-transitioners amongst others as those who the trans community 'often avoids talking about [...] because it complicates our efforts for acceptance' (2015).

The notion of an 'acceptable trans narrative' feeds into the concept of community intelligibility and viability. The exclusion of certain groups from community narratives suggests the explicit inclusion of others. Those identities that are accepted are validated through a process of intelligibility that leads to viability within those spaces. This creates further distinction between theory and lived experience in that such exclusions, implied or overt, go against the trans theoretical acceptance of all identities. Whilst specific intra-communities may make intelligible the individual identities within it, accepting and authenticating them, the wider community may still reflect cultural norms and therefore reinforce cultural biases and taboos. The widening of accepted norms that lead to cultural intelligibility and viability is something that needs to permeate both cis and trans community spaces.

However, although Click's specific intra-community is arguably in the minority, even within the shared social space of the QYRC, they still read other members of the broader queer community as unintelligible. When describing the only other 'queer folks in the [apartment] building', Click states:

They are these really weird yuppie lesbians [...] It was weird, though, to realize that they are queer because they sure don't act like it. They're kind of like any

other yuppie I know, talking about where they go out to eat, and how they will decorate the apartment, and their plan to have babies in a couple of years and get married, that kind of shit' (Lowrey, 2012, p.206).

Click here defines their neighbours according to their class before their sexuality. Whereas queerness is at the forefront of Click's own identification, they view their neighbours as failing to do the same and read them as 'yuppies', shallow, non-political people. The statement that it was 'weird [...] to realise that they are queer' (Lowrey, 2012, p.206), invokes a sense that, for Click, the queer community has a duty to contradict the norms of heterosexual culture in order to be considered valid, something that they do not view their neighbours as doing, defining them instead by their failure to undermine prevailing norms. This raises questions of identity policing. Click, in considering the women 'weird' for failing to live up to their own particular expectations, places a value judgement on the women's identity presentations. This acts to suggest that, for Click at least, normativity is a subjective stance based on the intra-community with which each person identifies, rather than with society as a whole. Without community backing and constant repetition, any norm would fall out of cultural awareness. For Click, their norms are based in the queer, trans 'gutter punk' and 'leather folk' intra-communities. As a result of this, they have particular expectations of the queer community that they do not have for heteronormative culture. For Click, one of these expectations is that individuals be visibly queer and/or actively counter cultural norms. This aligns with Sandy Stone's work on posttranssexuality wherein she argues that it is important for trans people to 'be consciously "read," to read oneself aloud' because 'silence can be an extremely high price to pay for acceptance' (in Epstein and Straub, 1991, p.299). However, in placing the responsibility of accurate reading with the trans person (or queer person, in the case of Click's neighbours), no accountability is accredited to others, including their wider society. But, '[r]eading oneself aloud' has no guarantee of being heard without there being a responsibility for culture to simultaneously actively read. The tools for accurate reading lie in the citation of existing identity references. The double bind of visibility is that it is necessary to provide such references, but also problematic and potentially dangerous to place the responsibility of doing so with individual trans people.

Click does at times struggle with 'reading themselves aloud', but this is usually due to being alone and therefore being without the sense of viability their community gives them. This may be seen at the beginning of the novel when they describe choosing which bathroom to use. In presenting as non-binary, Click 'reads aloud' their identity; they do not try to pass as binary, and as such their contradictions of gendered norms are foregrounded. When travelling from the south to Portland, Click discusses the difference in the legislature regarding gendered spaces, '[i]n Portland you have the right to be anywhere that corresponds to your gender identity, but it ain't that way down south' (Lowrey, 2012, p.10). Identifying as masculine non-binary, Click prefers to use the men's bathroom; however, alone in the airport, they are hesitant to do so; 'I almost just walked straight into the men's bathroom but then I saw another security guard looking at me' (Lowrey, 2012, p.9-10). This hesitance comes from the fear of being misread and rendered unintelligible by the guard. However, when taken in comparison to their attitude whilst with other members of their intra-community, this scene acts to highlight the impact that community viability can have on everyday lived experience. Click notes that when they were with their friend, James, the two of them 'would always have fun getting into trouble over that [using the men's bathroom], freaking out old dudes, picking fights with hicks and arguing with security guards, but this morning I was alone' (Lowrey, 2012, p.10). This highlights the impact that community viability can have on wider visibility. The presence of someone to externally validate a person's identity lessens the impact of potential misreadings and therefore enables individual acts of visibility, it also reduces the potential for violence, highlighting the way in which community and personal safety are linked.

In keeping with Formby's work on the ability to be in a community you have no physical access to, and the ability to be a part of multiple communities simultaneously, Click engages with the wider trans community through the Internet alongside their connection to a smaller intra-community through the QYRC. The Internet as a space for self-expression, the building of trans intra-communities and the raising of visibility is something that has been remarked upon by a number of trans scholars (See: Whittle, 1998; Cromwell, 1999; Shapiro, 2004; Hill, 2005; Rawson, 2014; Raun, 2016). Hill has described the way in which the majority of the respondents in their study:

relied on technology to come to terms with their gender, connect with others like themselves, and develop a more sophisticated sense of issues facing their community either by raising their consciousness or helping them to tell their own story. Ultimately, technology reduced their alienation and isolation and facilitated connections with their community (Hill, 2005, p.49).

This not only shows the importance of visibility on self-identification, but also how telling one's own story is a large part of this. The articulation of subjective experience is a crucial tool for the humanisation of minority groups, and what the internet creates is a space that is more accessible and less reliant on cultural capital than most others. This multifaceted use of the Internet highlights it as a place of information gathering, community building, grass roots activism and archiving. Rawson similarly notes that 'cyberspace provides a revolutionary tool for creating, sharing and preserving trans histories that would otherwise remain untold' (Rawson, 2014, p.40). However, these histories are not always objective. Highlighting this, *Roving Pack* features diary entries and blog posts that are set at varying levels of privacy ranging from 'Security: Private', to 'Security: Friends', and 'Security: Public' (Lowrey, 2012, p.20, 27). This is a textual feature that allows readers to distinguish between Click's personal experiences and the life they project to others. Sometimes, what is said on the blog directly contradicts the portrayal of occurrences written in the diary or 'private' blog entries. As Miller and Shepherd state:

The "reality" offered by blogs is thus a thoroughly perspectival reality, anchored in the personality of the blogger [...] although this reality [...] may seem to be "immediate" (that is, *un*-mediated), it is, of course, highly mediated (Miller and Shepherd, 2004).

Miller and Shepherd show how the line between the autobiographical and the constructed self is blurred. The novel, however, whilst showing how Click's blogs are constructed also sets up a false autobiographical self that mediates their experience to a greater or lesser extent depending on their intended reader. As Buckner and Fivush note, '[t]hose aspects of identity that are highlighted in specific retellings of the past

reflect those aspects of identity that are deemed important in specific situations, with specific others, for specific goals' (Buckner and Fivush, 2003, p. 149). This separation of the autobiographical self and the constructed self echoes Cinán's discussion of existing in the dissonance between imagination and reality. For Click this is about presenting a surety of identity and a picturesque depiction of their current relationship.

The distance between their representation of their public and private self may be seen in a private diary entry, Click describes an interaction with Hunter, their partner at the time, in which he accuses them of 'just playing around with this trans shit' (Lowrey, 2012, p.172), a clear act of identity policing that places negative value on Click's gender presentation and denying them intelligibility and viability. In response to this Click states that they will consider starting testosterone in order to prove their transness; within the same scene, Hunter, '[s]tarted kissing me and laid me down on the futon. My pants were around my ankles and I thought he was going to fuck me but then I jumped as steel punctured my ass [...] I guess I'm on T now' (Lowrey, 2012, p.173-174). This unwilling penetration is a symbolic rape that acts as an assault both against Click's body and autonomy, but also their identity, as it denies them the gender fluidity that they fight to have acknowledged throughout the text. However, in a public blog post, Click states 'I decided to start T!!!! [...] Had my first shot this week and I feel really good' (Lowrey, 2012, p.174). The contrast between the private and public description of this event highlight a number of issues alongside those of consent and bodily autonomy. Click's desire to prove their transness is due to externally imposed norms in which their fluid, non-binary identity is regarded as 'playing around' and discounted as a viable identity. As Tannehill notes, 'when the pressure comes from sources internal to the transgender community, it's often a result of acceptability politics and internalised transphobia' (Tannehill, 2015). Secondly, in disguising the non-consensual nature of this event, Click highlights their awareness of its abusiveness. Presenting this event as a decision both disguises the implications of the non-consensual penetration that Click experiences, and resignifies their identity presentation as binary. This again highlights the potential difference between gender identity and gender presentation, and the different ways in which this is mediated in various contexts.

When Click justifies their choice for starting testosterone to their brother, telling him that, '[w]e all grow up and realise that things need to make sense in the world and that sometimes the way that we live just isn't translatable' (Lowrey, 2012, p.175). It seems that where Click had previously wished that the world change to include them, they now wish to change to fit the world. This is in order to 'make sense' and therefore not incur the negative consequences of identity policing they faced while presenting as non-binary. This invokes the notion that cultural intelligibility is fundamental to cultural viability. However, Click's justification is based on the fallacy of testosterone being their own choice, they state that 'I made it sound like I'd really thought through everything' (Lowrey, 2012, p.175). In concealing the abuse they face from Hunter, Click also denies their own non-binary identity, something they'd previously been proud of, and later come to express again; however, by rooting it in a discussion of intelligibility, Click also exposes society's biologically essentialist views and the way in which the trans community may relate to them. Because their brother was familiar with their genderqueer identity, they are suspicious of Click's decision to start testosterone. It is only when Click describes wanting to 'make sense' that their brother capitulates to their justification, to which Click notes, '[h]e seemed to get that at least' (Lowrey, 2012, p.175). In citing intelligibility as a rational reason for changing their gender presentation, Click is compelled to reinforce cisnormative ideals that they otherwise do not identify with. This acts to highlight the potential for differentiation between gender identity and gender presentation, as well as the importance of diverse representation.

Whilst Click's self-expression is occasionally censored on the blog, their engagement with the community is explicit. According to Miller and Shepherd, the 'typified social action[s]' that blogs in particular perform are 'self-expression and community development' (2004). Click's division of their blog into private, friends and public posts is concurrent with different levels of community engagement. For example, their public posts are often directly addressed to the wider trans community:

**Date: September 30, 2003**

**Security: Public**

**Subject: Dean?**

Has anyone seen Dean around? He wasn't at the fountain downtown today when we'd planned to meet up (Lowrey, 2012, p.321, bold in original).

Other entries include asking if people can donate money to help another member of the intra-community travel home after he gets 'stuck in some hick town in Idaho' (Lowrey, 2012, p.287) or to advertise for a roommate within the queer community (Lowrey, 2012, p.260). As such, within the text these public posts act as both community building and community activism. Such online spaces enable those for whom personal engagement with the community is limited to maintain contact. This is important because 'it is through social interaction that individuals learn acceptable behaviours as well as share, acquire and shape cultural symbols in a continual cycle of reciprocity between self and community' (Koole, 2010, p.242). The acquisition of cultural symbols is also made possible through fictional work that represents a community. It is through knowledge of and identification with the wider community and the smaller more specific intra-communities that trans individuals are able to clarify their own identity, A lack of specific intra-communities may lead to feelings of inadequacy and pressure to apply community norms which do not fit the experience or identity of a particular individual. For example, Click believes their ambivalence to starting testosterone is a personal failure as it does not fit in with the choices of those around them and thus denies them community viability.

As discussed in chapter 1, wider society's treatment of trans identities is framed within biologically essentialist and cissexist assumptions. When this is coupled with a lack of visibility and adequate representation, the mechanisms of intelligibility engaged with by wider society are restricted by limited norms. To combat this, as part of their work with the QYRC, Click helps to run 'community education training' in which 'a bunch of us go into schools or jails or offices to tell folks what it's like to be young and queer' (Lowrey, 2012, p.29). This engagement is intended to 'help people understand', that is, raise awareness and visibility for the multiple types of trans identity, something that is facilitated through a number of activities and discussions within the workshop (Lowrey, 2012, p.29-31). Through this scene, Lowrey is able to provide material that is informational for the reader, but in keeping with the plot of the novel. It also acts to illustrate how trans people are sometimes treated by others and the personal

emotional impact this can have on the recipient. For example, during one session in particular, an attendee 'got all pissed off [...] tried to mess with Buck, asking all kinds of fucked up questions like if he was really a boy, and if he had a dick' (Lowrey, 2012, p.33). Buck's cultural intelligibility is called into question here; his ability to pass is not regarded as an issue, but rather his engagement with biological norms. This particular series of questions is also evocative of the treatment of Carmen Carrera in real life on the Katie Couric show in which the model was asked about her genitals in a way that suggested it was the interviewer's right to know the answer (May, 2014). Such treatment is entirely based on the awareness of that person's trans status. For Buck, it is only when the participants become aware of his trans identity that his intelligibility is called into question, as prior to that they had read him as cis. This highlights the difference between issues of passing and those of cultural viability. Whilst passing is only concerned with the aesthetic and a person's gender presentation within the prevailing binary gender structure, intelligibility covers a broader range of norms, meaning that it is constantly at risk of being revoked. Furthermore, this suggests that for a stealth or passing individual, the risk of being outed is not only the fear of violence, but also the reassertion of norms, such as biological or chromosomal, that had previously not been directly applied to them.

Alongside the connection of shared experience, aspects of intelligibility and viability, the trans community as a whole is also a key disseminator of knowledge. This is evident in both the educational nature of some trans novels, as briefly mentioned above, and in the sharing of hints and tips within the community itself. It has been noted that it is often the case that one particular narrative is the only one to be accepted by medical gatekeepers; which, as Tannehill describes, leads to 'a phenomenon where transgender people feel compelled to stick to a script [...] And most of the reasons have to do with various stigmas and a lack of acceptance being placed upon us by culture, psychology and medicine' (Tannehill, 2015). *Roving Pack* highlights this issue of editing and performing personal narratives in order to gain treatment. For example, Click states that their partner, Hunter, 'had been practicing telling his story [...] it ended up being just like everyone said it would be. Just a quick fifteen minute meeting, tell the shrink what he wanted to hear and get the hell out with the letter' (Lowrey, 2012, p.147). Hunter must construct a narrative that fits in

with what he has heard that doctors ‘wan[t] to hear’ and ensure that he remembers it accurately. The need for such personal editing is due to the narrow perceptions of trans identities, something directly linked to a lack of adequate visibility. Furthermore, the doctors that Hunter visits are both also trans, the ‘shrink who’s a trans guy’ and ‘old trans woman doctor’ (Lowrey, 2012, p.146) and were both recommended by Click and Hunter’s trans intra-community. The fact that both of the doctors here are themselves trans and renowned for making access to transition simple reveals the complexity of medical gatekeeping. If such editing is necessary within this context, it is presumably much more stridently enforced elsewhere. This also continues to reveal class issues as Click and Hunter’s discomfort with the doctor appears to be due to their difference in social status. Elsewhere in the novel, Click and Hunter show themselves to be comfortable accessing support from other trans people, however, as with the separation of the ‘street punks’ and ‘GSA kids’, the distance seems to come from class differences. Alongside the common issues with medical gatekeeping, Hunter is also facing intersectional issues in which his class leaves him feeling further pressured to conform to acceptable norms and to present an accepted narrative of transition.

### **3.4: *Otros Valles***

*Otros Valles* is a self-published novel by Latina trans woman Jamie Berrout. It follows Mira, as she ‘tak[es] a year off from school to collect myself’ (Berrout, n.d., p.72) and returns to her hometown in the Rio Grande Valley on the border of Arizona and Mexico (Berrout, n.d., p.19). ‘Collecting herself’ here refers to her transition. Mira is a non-binary, androgynous trans woman from undocumented, Spanish-speaking Mexican immigrant family who are ‘told that we swam across the border, that we don’t belong’ (Berrout, n.d., p.18). As such, she and her family experience multiple intersections of oppression, something that Mira faces alongside a lack of understanding of her identity and no access to a trans community. Speaking of her mother’s limited acceptance of her identity, Mira states, ‘I don’t correct her for misgendering me, not because it doesn’t hurt to still be called a boy after our conversations around the fact that I’m a trans woman but because it might hurt more to argue over the fact in public’ (Berrout, n.d., p.10). This indicates that it is potentially dangerous for Mira’s identity to be discussed in public but also describes the lack of

understanding Mira has within her family. Discussing her own identity, Mira states that she had always wished to be 'transformed into a girl', but that 'in my dreams I never had to be trans, never had to deal with ambiguity or fluidity of identity' (Berrout, n.d., p.71). Mira goes on to describe her own sense of powerlessness when faced with the need to explain and justify her identity to a cis person, stating that '*[c]is feelings must be protected at all cost [...] any cis person's feelings toward the trans identity of a friend or relative are so fragile, so overwhelmingly important, that they'll never let you forget how hard it is for them*' (Berrout, n.d., p.10, italics in original). What these quotations show is how Mira's default assumption is that those around her will never accept her identity and how her lack of access to a trans community in which she would not need to 'protect cis feelings' leaves her unable to protect herself from misgendering.

The novel is written as a series of fragments that cover several months of Mira's life, and features some political commentary that uses the protagonist's voice to address the reader. Mira's Mexican heritage is an important part of the text. Due to the rigidity of Mexican gender norms, Mira describes her family as having limited understanding and acceptance of trans identities and discusses the difficulty of 'growing up around Mexican people where no deviation from the gender binary was tolerated (allowed to live)' (Berrout, n.d., p.67). The aside in parentheses here, 'allowed to live' indicates that, beyond a lack of understanding and acceptance, Mira faces potentially life-threatening circumstances within the Mexican community due to her identity. The fact that this threat of physical violence is only reported in parenthesis indicates that Mira prioritises 'tolerance' and acceptance of her identity over physical safety. It shows how Mira is often rendered unviable within her family home, which she describes as being a particular issue in her context because 'family is a fundamental concept for Mexicans, we live together in large extended families' (Berrout, n.d., p.63). As such, two aspects of Mira's identity are rendered incompatible, leaving her without the support of the only community that she has physical access to at the time.

As a character, Mira illustrates the intersectional implications of how being readable as both trans and Latin@<sup>7</sup> leads to a doubling of misrepresentation. She highlights that there is nothing 'that would allow me to avoid casual and escalating violence for being trans and Latina' (Berrout, n.d., p.32). The use of 'and' here, rather than 'or' implies that her embodiment of two marginalised identities combine to justify any 'escalating violence' against her, something that reflects Erickson-Schroth's discussion of intersectionality in which they note that:

The multiple identities and spaces we occupy can be interpreted through the idea of intersectionality [...] the concept that our identities are complicated – our experiences as people of a specific gender, race, sexuality, ability, and ethnicity are interconnected and cannot be separated (Erickson-Schroth, 2014, p.19).

These issues of intersectionality and visibility are a recurring motif throughout the novel, with Mira acting to highlight the impact of being erased as both a trans woman and a person of colour. For example, she describes the 'ruling minority of people (white or white Latin@s) who [...] make sure we remain caught under devastating hierarchies of power and need' (Berrout, n.d., p.19), and how she and her family 'pick apart the local paper for some meagre scraps of news, those little hints of our reality' (Berrout, n.d., p.25). Mira here points to race, and whiteness in particular, as structurally privileged in mainstream and Latin@ societies. Thus, Mira's oppression is intersectional, encompassing gender identity, race, provenance and class. She is not just invisible as a trans woman, but as a trans Latin@ woman of colour whose family is undocumented and therefore unable to access official and structural resources. What this highlights is the way in which representation and visibility are crucial for all minority groups in order to make them viable and accepted and highlights the dual nature of this novel. As a text, *Otros Valles* acts to provide the representation and visibility that Mira describes as necessary, but it also, in featuring Mira's perspective through the use of first person, highlights to the reader the wider issues that trans people and people of colour face.

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<sup>7</sup> Latin@ and Latinx are both accepted gender neutral variations of the words Latina/Latino.

Beyond needing to search for 'meagre scraps' of representation, Mira describes the active oppression that she and her family face as Latin@, stating 'there are so many stereotypes, cruel jokes, around here regarding Mexicans who swim [...] How many words do gringos have for "wetback"? Even being called "Mexican," that neutral description of nationality has improbably become an insult' (Berrout, n.d., p.18). The lack of viability she faces for her gender identity is further compounded by the fact that her ethnicity (an aspect of her identity for which she does have a community) is also denied cultural viability. Mira's linking of her status as trans and Latin@ as a source of the violence she faces is reflective of and acts to highlight something seen in our reality, the fact that '[t]rans people of colour are more often victims of violence, more often subject to targeting by police [...] more often labelled as criminals [...] are also disproportionately affected by poverty' (Erickson-Schroth, 2014, p.34). Trans theory has aimed to overcome these structural inequalities through the promotion of an intersectional approach to discrimination and oppression, '[i]ntersectionality allows us to approach trans discrimination as an interlocking system of oppression rather than as one solely based on gender' (Erickson-Schroth, 2014, p.19); however, this is something that can only be achieved with increased visibility and representation of those identities, humanising them and making them intelligible.

When reflecting on how little trans visibility there is, Mira notes that it had taken her a long time to realise that she was trans because 'I had been taught nothing but lies about trans people' (Berrout, n.d., p.71) showing the impact that visibility and representation can have in allowing people to become aware of and articulate their own trans identities. She also describes how '[t]he stories about trans women in the news – they are almost entirely stories about violence against trans women of colour, the ceaseless killings' (Berrout, n.d., p.37). Due to Mira's isolation and her choice to avoid most social situations, she never directly faces physical violence within the novel. However, in using Mira's narrative to raise the issue, Berrout is highlighting to the reader the severity of the violence trans people, particularly trans women of colour, face. In describing the limitation of available visibility to the 'ceaseless' victimhood of trans women of colour, Mira also highlights the way in which this has the effect of dehumanising the victim by focussing only on the violence performed against them. In

having this as the main source of visibility, violence against trans people becomes normalised within society. This narrative of dehumanisation may only be offset by increased positive representations of trans people, as Godfrey notes:

Visibility is essential to increase acceptance and understanding across society. Considering the disproportionate levels of discrimination faced by trans people, many of those who do not pass are not comfortable with the idea of being visibly trans (Godfrey, 2015).

Godfrey suggests here that visibility and the personal expression of gender are interlinked, and that a lack of visibility is directly connected to a lack of acceptance, which can then lead to gender expression being a potential source of oppression and violence. This is also seen in the text when Mira notes that:

Maybe no one will look at me when I'm old, maybe I'll be a safer [sic] then as a trans woman, no one will suspect that I am myself because they won't even see me – not having heard of any old or elderly trans women, they won't know it's possible for me to exist (Berrout, n.d., p.40).

Here Mira links invisibility with safety, in noting that no one will look at her when she is old, presumably because she will have ceased being a sex object, and she will therefore be free from 'suspicion'. This links being visible to being in danger, but, in noting that no one will 'know it's possible' for an older trans person to exist, simultaneously highlights the need for improved representation in order to make all trans people intelligible and viable as themselves without needing to be invisible.

Just as Mira links invisibility to safety and viability, Joshua Gamson describes 'the tightrope of visibility', in which visibility is a means by which to 'lay the groundwork for political change' (Gamson, 1998, p.213), but:

Even as the categories that mark us as different are necessary for claiming rights and benefits, it is only when they are unworkable that we are really safe

[...] fixed identity categories are both the basis for oppression and the basis for political power (Gamson, 1998, p.222-223).

What Gamson suggests here is that being visible is the only way to gain rights as a collective, but as an individual it is rife with potential danger. This reinforces the importance of representation in cultural output, as Serano notes, '[w]hen so many of us are misunderstood and ridiculed, trans narratives have the potential to humanise us' (Serano, 2015). Featuring trans people positively in fictional settings has the benefits of visibility and humanisation without making that person an immediate potential target for physical violence. It is important to note that this representation needs to be trans-led, using trans authors, producers and actors in order to ensure at least some level of accurate and positive representation. This is something that Mira discusses in the novel, stating that:

there should be more of a focus on the way this creative work about trans people is made, and less of a focus on the feelings of cis people and white trans people, who will always make art in their own image [...] I don't know how there can be art about trans people without trans people (Berrout, n.d., p.110).

Mira argues here that engaging minorities in representing themselves ensures a level of diversity that is not otherwise possible. She also highlights the importance of not considering only one aspect of identity whilst producing creative work, noting how white trans people can also produce limited representation of the wider community potentially due to their own lack of intersectional oppression. Mira specifically states that the structural inequalities that lead to a lack of intersectional trans representation directly leads to the issues she faces throughout this text:

When people [...] don't have any example, any physical or fictional representation, to compare against and match an identity, they end up going with whatever fits their limited experience [...] non-binary identities are not real to the people around me. And it's too much pressure for me to bring these identities into being without help – I'll tell people now that I'm a trans woman

without my interior equivocation [...] not be completely myself (Berrout, n.d., p.67).

Here, lack of representation leads directly to Mira being unable to express the complexities of her true identity as non-binary, and she later cites this as also being an issue within the trans community itself. Describing the 'pressure' she is under to conform to a binary identity that others can understand, even if they do not support it, is directly linked to her lack of community. In an effort to make herself intelligible to others, her actual non-binary identity is made invisible and unviable. However, she indicates that should she have had 'help' from a community she would have had the energy and power to 'bring into being' a non-binary identity. Diverse representation leads to diverse humanisation, something that is crucial to the attainment of cultural viability, but also community viability. Not having access to a more specific non-binary intra-community, Mira works to engage with the broader more binary trans community. Click in *Roving Pack* also engaged with binary norms in order to gain a community because, as Mira goes on to note, as non-binary 'your community won't know how to treat you. Your family won't know how to treat you. Your friends - you'll find out just how well you know them' (Berrout, n.d., p.50). Due to the lack of possibility models and her awareness of how difficult it would be for her to 'bring' her non-binary identity 'into being', Mira alters her self-presentation in order to simplify the process of gaining acceptance. Mira describes how:

the idea that I should look or behave a certain way to be a legitimate or true trans woman - all that's ever brought me has been more shame and self-hatred at the thought that I wasn't actually a girl or trans enough for others - these stereotypes and lies, illusions of safety, that I've spent too much time chasing after (Berrout, n.d., p.145).

This may be linked back to how norms internal to the trans community can further oppress those who are already subjugated by wider society. Here Mira mentions not only a lack of societal acceptance, but more specifically the fear and struggle associated with a perceived failure to comply with the norms of what a 'true' trans woman would look or act like and being 'trans enough' to count as valid within the

trans community. Because Mira is unable to access an intra-community close to her, she is only able to speculate on whether or not she would be accepted by other trans people, this speculation is likely based in what she has been able to witness second-hand. As such, this conjecture is based on what is made visible to her, something which, as has been noted, is based on various power structures and the single story narrative.

I argue throughout this thesis that trans authored narratives are a fundamental part of making trans experience intelligible to both wider society and other trans people. However, even when trans-led representation is available, it is not always accessible. Mira speaks about how the intersectional issues of her class, race and gender presentation prevent her from engaging with trans authored fiction:

I keep hearing about it, but I never read Imogen Binnie's book. I read the first pages in the used bookstore [...] as I was reading it I kept thinking that it was good, that it had good ideas and those ideas might even help with the issues I was already running in to - coming out at school and work, dating while trans. But I couldn't stand there reading the way other people were since the clerks kept circling me [...] I'd been marked for criminality as the only person with brown skin inside the store [...] and, more so, looked feminine without exactly seeming to be a woman, therefore raised more questions that worked against me (Berrout, n.d., p.65).

Mira's race and gender ambiguity mark her as a potential criminal in the eyes of the clerks. She is not able to read more of the book in-store, and neither can she buy it as the price was 'so out of reach', she leaves the store without finishing the book or being able to purchase it, '[e]ver since then I've wondered if reading Imogen's book would have somehow solved my problems' (Berrout, n.d., p.66). This highlights the ways in which the intersections of Mira's identity all come together to negatively affect her life, but it also shows the potential for positive change that trans fiction can have. Mira believes that there is at least a chance that reading something by a trans author will be beneficial to her, something that she later confirms upon reading Janet Mock's autobiography and stating that it 'wakes her up', that 'I hear more of the sounds of the

house, feel more of the fabrics against my skin, see more of the colours in the mirror in front of me' (Berrout, n.d., p.107). The reference to a mirror, beyond being a recurring motif in trans fiction, is one that highlights how visibility and representation can directly lead to other people seeing themselves more clearly, something that the previous discussion of the benefits of community also highlighted.

In order to try to overcome the isolation she feels as a trans woman within the small town she lives in, Mira seeks a sense of community online. As mentioned, the Internet is a fundamental aspect of the trans community, particularly for those unable to access one in person. Tobias Raun's 2016 work on trans communities on YouTube cites his participants as saying that 'most of them listed a lack of community and need for support as motivating factors' for using the Internet (2016, p.183). The participants also stated that they actively use the Internet 'as a platform to create *new* social relations' (Raun, 2016, p.183). This is in keeping with Mira's experiences in *Otros Valles*, she searches online for 'resources, support groups, any bit of information about trans people who live in the area' (Berrout, n.d., p.13). Her implied desperation for contact with other members of her community highlights to the reader the isolation she feels as a person, especially to those readers for whom 'community' is something taken for granted. The Internet provides Mira's only access to other members of the trans community and as such her only access to the intelligibility and viability it may provide. She states that there are 'especially useful' sites which feature information and the sharing of narratives (Berrout, n.d., p.14). This is something that is particularly key within the trans community as it is this sharing of information that often allows individuals to progress through medical gatekeeping, as was also mentioned in *Roving Pack*. Furthermore, shared narratives, according to Formby's research, allow people to feel that they are not 'the only one in the world' (Formby, 2017, p.160). Therefore, the sharing of narratives directly assists in overcoming personal isolation. This means that for Mira, the online narratives are crucial to her personal sense of viability, but for any trans reader of *Otros Valles* itself, the novel acts as the shared narrative. The novel itself speaks to this need to find representation and community. Mira's name means 'to look' in Spanish, and the title, *Otros Valles*, means 'other valleys', these together suggest that the narrative is about Mira looking elsewhere for community, which in this case she finds online.

However, the Internet, whilst a key source of information and community for trans people, also reflects structural inequalities, this may be witnessed, for example, by the fact that 'white (Anglo-) American trans people often get more exposure and views', and as one of Raun's participants, Diamond noted, there is a 'lack of trans women of color' represented online (Raun, 2016, p.198). Furthermore, it has been shown that trans people still run the risk of receiving transphobic violence online, they may 'become the targets of hate speech that reinforces rather than challenges established power hierarchies' (Raun, 2016, p.199). This is reflected in the text when Mira describes her own interactions online, noting:

[T]he unrepentant racism that drives away people of colour from these last resources, the tendency toward a restrictive ideal of binary trans womanhood, and the attacks against trans women with opposing views or identities as angry, unstable, and ruinous to the cause (Berrout, n.d., p.14).

Anger is a racially inflected stereotype often applied to black women to deny their experiences and silence their voices, something that Mira describes here as also happening in the online community. The 'restricted ideals' Mira mentions here are reflective of the discussion in chapter 2 of this thesis regarding the single story narrative, something which is shown here to be perpetuated online. In this particular quotation, Mira is specifically describing the trans community online and the restrictions that some members impose on others. This therefore implies that there is a hierarchy in the online community spaces that Mira is able to access in which non-binary and/or trans people of colour are assigned a lower status than those that fit the white and binary 'restrictive ideals'. The issues of intersectional oppression that are raised here highlight to the reader the ways in which wider societal structural inequalities may impact the trans community and further disinherit those who are already subjugated. The ethos of trans theory is one of acceptance, in which intersectionality is considered the most valuable way in which 'to approach trans discrimination as an interlocking system of oppression rather than as one solely based on gender' (Erickson-Schroth, 2014, p.19). This is especially important for a person in

Mira's position as an unemployed trans woman of colour living in a cultural space that is actively against her identity as a concept.

Whilst some online spaces are problematic, Mira notes that 'there's still information here that can save lives' (Berrout, n.d., p.14). This indicates that there can be a disconnect between community as a locus of information and community as a support network. This is further emphasised when she notes that, '[t]here are so many people online, some of whom I know are friends, but when I open up the browser the cold vastness of the internet [sic] stares back at me' (Berrout, n.d., p.16). The dual status of the Internet here as a place of friendship and 'cold vastness' shows the ways in which, for her at least, the Internet is not an adequate replacement for in-person community spaces. However, as one of the participants in Hill's study states, '[t]he biggest impact on the transgender world has been the Internet [...] I cannot overestimate its importance. It is [...] more than anything else how contact has been made for hundreds and hundreds of people who are isolated and otherwise out of contact' (Hill, 2005, p.39). As such, virtual intra-communities are framed as an adequate alternative if a physical intra-community is not available. This is also reflected in *Roving Pack* wherein the Internet is used to supplement the local trans intra-community, rather than substitute for it. It is also in agreement with Formby's work mentioned previously which notes that knowing that you are not 'the only one' is one of the most important elements of having a community and that the internet is a fundamental space in which this can be made possible. For Mira, however, as the Internet as her sole source of community at this point in the narrative, rather than being an addition to a physical community, she still expresses a sense of isolation and loneliness.

The critical importance of community is made immediately apparent when Mira directly links it with survival, stating, 'what I need to understand now, is that no one is coming to wrap their arms around me and help me stay alive because there's no community in deep South Texas for girls like me' (Berrout, n.d., p.14). This connection of community and survival is twofold. Firstly, the statement 'help me stay alive' implies that Mira faces a level of risk, either internally or externally, that a community would help mitigate. A local intra-community would allow for physical and interpersonal support, as witnessed in *Roving Pack* when Click feels safer using their chosen

bathroom when they are able to do so with the back-up of their friend. Secondly, having a community ensures at least one space in which a trans person's identity is entirely viable. As Mira notes:

[E]very other day there are pressing matters that I need to talk about with someone, anyone [...] I'm at the trails with my mom and any number of strangers that I might talk to if I was like everyone else. But I'm not like everyone else because I don't run into old friends or coworkers every hundred metres like my mom does, like the people with intact lives do (Berrout, n.d., p.16).

This frames Mira's lack of community as a lack of shared experience. This sense of not being 'intact' and not being 'like everyone else' implies that without community she does not feel viably human as she does not have the 'minimum conditions for a liveable life' (Butler, 2004, p.225-226). Throughout the text, Mira expresses a need for in-person community and describes holding some aspect of herself back only to be shared with the other trans people she knows online, 'I still don't wear it [her hair] down, not even in the house, I want it to be something that's mine to covet and share with my friends online or strangers' (Berrout, n.d., p.80). What this suggests is that Mira feels more able to express herself with those that she shares an identity with, even if they are otherwise strangers. Any sense of belonging that she experiences with her family is not comparable to that which she experiences with other trans people; her family does not make her feel intelligible or viable even though they are aware of her identity and physically accessible. This reflects the definition of community used in this thesis in which community is built through a shared oppression based on the identification with and lived experience of being trans. As such, it is unlikely that her family alone would be able to provide all of the validation she needs, however, Mira notes that her family are not entirely supportive of her identity. She describes the micro-aggressions she faces from her family, who, whilst they do not attack or disown her, 'force you out of their lives in different ways', 'for me, it has never been less than a negotiation where I know I will sometimes lose', '[e]verything must be explained and explained again [...] [or] I'll continue to be hurt by the stubborn, ugly ideas that drive their actions' (Berrout, n.d., p.63). This highlights the emotional labour that Mira must

engage in to try to gain intelligibility within her family, something that is made entirely her own responsibility to achieve. This again highlights the necessity of placing responsibility with the reader of identities rather than with the people living them.

Throughout the novel Mira discusses her lack of societal acceptance and viability, both due to society's general lack of recognition, and particularly in her case, her culture's general disavowal of gender movement. This is what frames her need for community and the subsequent viability it has the power to evoke, something that she highlights in her discussion of 'coveting' those things she can share specifically with them. Beyond this, though, she describes not only a desire to be part of a community, but the willingness and longing to make one of her own. She states:

There's a girl like me, another twenty-something trans Latina, who lives in my neighbourhood and I don't know what to do about it. No, I know exactly that I want to talk to her, be her friend and share my burdens with her, taste her lips and tongue and fall in love together, *organise and protect all the other trans women here* (Berrout, n.d., p.35, my italics).

This again connects the idea of community with that of being secure. Mira's wish to 'organise and protect' other trans people shows how she views community as fundamental to both political activism and as a mechanism of safety. Some part of this may come from Mira's recollection of this woman, known only as 'K', from when they were growing up, remembering 'the name she went by when we were kids, the terrible things people said about her back then' (Berrout, n.d., p.35). This links isolation to violent oppression and community with safety and is suggestive of the results of Formby's data which describes the way that LGBT "'magnetise" towards each other' as being a "'natural" response to (external) oppression' (Formby, 2017, p.69). However, for Mira, natural magnetisation is not enough, she wishes to actively create a community, something that is more reflective of Valentine's stance mentioned previously in which community is created through a shared identification with the notion of being trans and is then affirmed through active participation.

Late in the novel, Mira meets K, the 'girl like her' in her neighbourhood, and they strike up a friendship. Both women share multiple axes of oppression, and Mira expresses the power of this connection stating, '*I know this girl, this girl is like me*' (Berrout, n.d., p.36, italics in original). She describes finding it extraordinary that she is able to speak 'to another trans woman face to face [like it] was the most ordinary thing' (Berrout, n.d., p.56). The wonder with which Mira describes K, and the fact that she finds being able to speak with her so remarkable emphasises the levels of isolation she had previously experienced. Furthermore, Mira highlights how potential or perceived hierarchies within the trans community can impact on the ability to build local intra-communities when she tells K '*I didn't know how to talk to you, I know we're both. . . I'm trans too, but you were way ahead of me*', meaning further ahead in her transition and more able to pass, which Mira reads as meaning K is above her in the hierarchy and therefore unapproachable (Berrout, n.d., p.57, italics in original). The narrative that trans people are to be judged on their level of transition or ability to pass is one that is based in damaging tropes wherein value is ascribed to those who fit cissexist norms. This is something that can be overcome with the wider representation of various trans identities and intra-communities. Had such visibility been available, Mira may not have been so hesitant to contact K and may have more quickly reached the point where when they are together 'I feel a great sense of relief – it's like I've been so worried all this time, always guarding myself against others to stay safe [...] I'm not afraid anymore' (Berrout, n.d., p.138). In many other novels making a single friend would be a relatively small plot point, but in this novel, due to its motifs of isolation, loneliness and invisibility, it is the culmination of Mira's narrative. In establishing a community, albeit a small one, Mira is suddenly free to exist visibly as herself and engage meaningfully with another person.

### **3.5: Coda**

The two texts in this chapter each highlight different areas for consideration. *Otros Valles* (Berrout, n.d.) shows how the lack of a trans intra-community can affect a trans person's intelligibility and viability, highlighting the importance of both trans community spaces, but also the accessibility of diverse trans narratives. My analysis of *Roving Pack* (Lowrey, 2012), however, has shown that whilst involvement with the trans community is beneficial in that it provides both support and advice it is not

necessarily a simple and direct method of attaining cultural viability. Both of these texts foreground issues of intersectionality as fundamental to lived experience, and in particular the way in which facing multiple forms of oppression directly impacts upon both cultural and community-based viability.

This chapter has addressed how the overarching trans community is further divided into smaller intra-communities based on more specific shared features. I argue that the community as a whole is united by shared oppression and a desire to improve trans rights. This is something that can only be made possible through improved representation and visibility. As this chapter has shown, representation of the full range of trans identities is fundamental to this goal, without such, trans people are at risk from a lack of both cultural and community-based intelligibility and viability. These issues are fundamentally linked to cultural output and the negative ways in which representation is generally mediated by structural oppression. As Walters notes:

Visibility is, of course, necessary for equality. It is part of the trajectory of any movement for inclusion and social change. We come to know ourselves and to be known by others through the images and stories of popular culture. There is nothing worse than to live in a society in which the traces of your own existence have been erased or squeezed into a narrow and humiliating set of stereotypes (Walters, 2003, p.13).

It is the work of this thesis to attempt to negate such erasure by using only trans authors and through the explicit inclusion of both authors and critics that face intersectional forms of oppression. Fundamentally what this chapter argues is that representation and visibility are crucial to the intelligibility and viability of trans lives, particularly those that do not abide by the single story.

## Chapter 4: Society and Violence

### 4: Introduction

Violence is a crucial issue in trans lives and a key theme of trans theory, trans activism and trans fiction. As this thesis has demonstrated thus far, the way in which a society receives trans people has a huge impact on the viability of those trans peoples' lives. The othering of trans people and the enforcement of cissexist and binary norms is something that affects trans people on both a personal and societal level. Legal and medical matters, a person's ability to gain employment, and their acceptance within their local and wider community are all negatively affected by cissexist structural oppression. Serano has noted that:

We often have trouble obtaining basic legal documents and rights. The fact that we are trans often complicates our experience during job interviews, in medical settings, or in every day human interactions [...] Trans people, and especially trans people of colour, disproportionately experience high levels of harassment and physical assault, workplace discrimination, unemployment, poverty and homelessness (Serano, 2015).

As discussed in the previous chapter, cultural intelligibility and viability are fundamental to a person's functioning within society, any lack thereof often leads to violence, as may be historically evidenced by the institutionalisation of lesbians (see Amico, 1998, p.776) and incarceration of gay men (see Cook, 2007, p.109), each of which was based on the othering and dehumanisation of a group of people based on their sexuality. In these cases, a person's sexuality was perceived as a difference from the societal norm that was then deemed less worthy and, as a result, deserving of punishment. Illustrating this point, Johan Galtung, a leading scholar in peace research, notes that '[a]ny Self-Other gradient can be used to justify violence against those lower down on the scale of worthiness' (Galtung, 1990, p.302). What Galtung emphasises here is the way in which the hierarchisation of perceived difference leads to the malicious targeting of particular groups of people. In a contemporary context, the scope of this this may be seen in the existence of hate-crime as a category. More specifically it may be witnessed by the disproportionately high statistics of reported

trans murders, which are '17 times higher than the murder rate of non-transgender individuals' (Lee and Kwan, 2014, p.96).

Whilst trans rights are progressing in some ways, with employment and anti-discrimination legislature being passed, there has also been a great deal of conservative backlash, as evidenced by the passing of the bathroom bill in 2016 and the continued legality of the 'trans panic' defence: '[t]hose coming out now are doing so with trepidation, realising that while pockets of tolerance are expanding, discriminatory policies and hostile, uninformed attitudes remain widespread' (The Editorial Board, 2015). However, the impact of society's norms and intolerances is fundamental to the acceptance and validation of trans identities, without which trans people cannot viably exist in society. In order to fight for the rights of an identity group, it must first be acknowledged within society that the group exists, which is often achieved through activism and consciousness raising. Once an identity has been acknowledged it is then recognisable within its society, that is, it is culturally intelligible. Acceptance into social hierarchies of gender, then, is of great importance to the trans community as it is through this that the demand for equality can be articulated. As Gagne, Tewkesbury and McGaughey describe:

Identity is constructed within a range of potential social options. The dominant Western system of gender has made it difficult for those whose gender falls somewhere between or outside of the binary system to understand and accept themselves or to be recognised as socially legitimate. Gender is achieved in social interaction with others, to achieve accountability as a social actor, one must enact gender in ways that are socially recognisable and decodeable (Gagne, Tewksbury and McGaughey, 1997, p.479).

This social constructivist stance reiterates what was discussed in chapter two regarding the way in which Western culture limits gender expression through its enforcement of binary and cissexist norms. What Gagney, Tewkesbury and McGaughey explain here is the way in which cultural norms are not only a key part of social acceptance but also of individual's understanding of their own identity. As discussed in the previous chapter, it is difficult to be what you cannot see. Having visible representation of a range of

identities allows those that fall outside of cis-binary assumptions to better comprehend their own identity, or at least the possibility of existing in a way that society does not readily acknowledge. Without cultural intelligibility trans people are at constant risk of being denied viability, something that leads not only to a lack of acceptance within society, but active discrimination and violence.

The complexity of violence in society has been discussed by Galtung in his work within peace and conflict studies in which he makes a number of distinctions between types of violence. In the first instance he distinguishes between physical and psychological violence in order to draw attention to the 'narrow concept of violence' in which the physical is foregrounded and the psychological hidden (Galtung, 1969, p.169). He also describes the notions of positive and negative violence, stating that violence can be achieved through the positive reinforcement of 'good' behaviour and/or the punishment of the 'bad', creating boundaries and limits that are based on the desire of wanting to be 'one of the good ones' (Galtung, 1969, p.170). This is something that can be clearly seen within the trans context. Cultural viability is based on these processes of violence, in which acquiescence to cissexist norms is a way in which to avoid punishment and as such attain a level of viability and cultural capital. As Galtung notes, '[t]he system is reward-oriented, based on promises of euphoria, but in so being also narrows down the ranges of action' (Galtung, 1969, p.170). Rewarding 'good' behaviour and punishing 'bad' leads to only that fraction of 'good' behaviours, or identities being viable. In the previous chapter I analysed the way in which visibility and representation enable viability, which also links to Galtung's proposition above. That which is 'good' and is rewarded is also what is allowed to be represented, which shows the workings behind how representation and viability are linked. Diversifying representation and visibility has the effect of broadening the borders of acceptability, and, therefore, reducing the artificial boundaries that demarcate 'good' from 'bad'.

To further explain systems of violence, Galtung describes three overarching categories, 'direct violence', 'structural violence' and 'cultural violence', which he describes as strata in order to explain how each one feeds into the other (Galtung, 1990). Direct violence is that which occurs between 'concrete persons as actors' (Galtung, 1969, p.170-171). Structural violence is that which is 'built into the structure and shows up as

unequal power and consequently unequal life chances [...] *Resources* are unevenly distributed [...] Above all the *power to decide over the distribution of resources* is unevenly distributed' (Galtung, 1969, p.170-171). Underlying both of these is cultural violence, 'those aspects of culture, the symbolic sphere of our existence – exemplified by religion and ideology, language and art, empirical science and formal science (logic, mathematics) – that can be used to justify or legitimise direct or structural violence', going on to note that '[c]ultural violence makes direct and structural violence look, even feel, right – or at least not wrong' (Galtung, 1990, p.291). Direct, cultural and structural violence work together to naturalise and enforce cultural norms and deny viability to those that exist beyond or outside of those norms. The way in which these forms of violence are expressed cover both positive and negative violence, as discussed above, in which 'good' behaviour is rewarded and 'bad' behaviour, that which goes against the norms enforced by society, is punished.

Dean Spade has also discussed cultural and structural violence, describing how 'understanding the dispersion of power helps us realise that power is not simply about certain individuals being targeted for death or exclusion by a ruler, but instead about the creation of norms that distribute vulnerability and security' (Spade, 2015, p.4). It is these norms that are the basis and justification of the negative treatment of trans people either at a structural or direct level. What Spade's work highlights is that whilst direct violence is a primary concern in trans activism, the way that it can be most efficiently tackled is through understanding the more theoretical aspects of power. Through his work as a lawyer, he has found that '[d]iscrimination law primarily conceptualises [harm] through the perpetrator/victim dyad [...] it individualises' oppression and therefore 'structural or systematic [oppression] is rendered invisible [...] [which] serves to naturalise and affirm the status quo of maldistribution' (Spade, 2015, p.42). His work, therefore, aims to make this oppression visible. Of particular interest within this thesis is Spade's suggestion that, 'counter narratives have challenged the notion that violence is a result of private individuals [... and] resistant political theorists and social movements have helped us understand the concept of "state violence"' (Spade, 2015, p.2). Here, Spade emphasises the role that narratives have in articulating the trans experience and making clear the oppression trans people face. Furthermore, he highlights the role that trans activism has had alongside trans

theory to work towards the same goal. Each of these sources is held as equally valid in Spade's work, as they are in my own, as they each work together to provide a comprehension of trans existence that would not be as vivid were it missing any part of the triumvirate.

In this chapter I will analyse examples and representations of transphobia, the way in which it is reinforced by both official and popular culture and its subsequent effect on the lives of trans people in the forms of direct, structural and institutional violence. I will explore what I am labelling as 'identity violence', wherein I describe the lack of societal acknowledgement of trans identities and the subsequent dehumanisation of trans people as a specific form of violence that spans across Galtung's categories of cultural, structural and psychological violence and prohibits the viability of trans lives. I will discuss both the explicit and covert nature of identity and physical violence, the ways in which they are inherently linked, and how this may be seen in trans fiction. Whereas chapters one and two explored the way in which gender norms and the essentialised binary interacted with trans identity, this chapter will examine the impact of such norms on the cultural viability and lived experience of trans people and the way in which this is represented within two key fictional texts, *Nevada* (Binnie, 2013) and *First Spring Grass Fire* (Spoon, 2012).

#### **4.1: Identity violence**

I define identity violence as the cultural devaluation of particular identities based on their deviation from culturally legitimated norms that leads to the individual denial of a subject's identity. This may be seen, for instance, in the refusal to call a trans person by the correct name or pronouns. Identity violence encompasses Galtung's (1969, 1990) notions of psychological, cultural, and structural violence, but also accounts for the subsequent issues of self-policing, a form of pre-emptive self-violence, and the ways that this can impact on a person's identity presentation and embodiment. It is a type of violence that is specifically based on a person's identity with the purpose and effect of policing, erasing and making unviable that identity. The reason I am defining a specific form of violence is that it acts as a shorthand to imply the uniting of Galtung's definitions of psychological, cultural and structural violence and the subsequent addition of self-violence. Whilst Galtung's work does conceive of

some level of inward facing 'frustration' or 'apathy' (Webel and Galtung, 2009), it does not account for the trans specific ability to change key aspects of their identity presentation as a result of, or in order to avoid, external forms of violence. Identity violence accounts for all aspects of Galtung's complex models of violence but also allows for the self-editing and self-policing forms of violence that negatively impact the embodiment, cultural viability, and lived experience of trans people. Regarding trans identities, identity violence refers to the ways in which trans identities are considered not only to be false but a transgressive deviation from culturally mandated norms and therefore culturally unviable. The cissexist assumptions of the falseness of any identity outside of the cisgender binary leads to their dehumanisation which then leads to the justification of violence against them.

The way in which trans theory tackles the foundational issues of identity violence is through valuing and emphasising subjective knowledge, something partially achieved through its genesis in activism. By placing emphasis on personal identity and lived experience, trans theory and activism isolate the normative processes of society from the reality of trans identity. In removing the cissexist norms, the actualisation of trans embodiment may be understood outside of the social evaluations that deem them unviable. As Stryker notes:

In an epistemological regime structured by the subject-object split, the bodily situatedness of knowing becomes divorced from the status of formally legitimated objective knowledge; experiential knowledge of the material effects of one's own antinormative bodily difference on the production and reception of what one knows consequentially becomes delegitimated as merely subjective (Stryker, 2008, p.154).

Trans theory and activism are based in knowledge rooted in the personal experience of one's own body, placing lived experience and embodiment at the forefront of their discursive positions. Activism fundamentally speaks from a personal and community basis. However, theory has traditionally been separated from this and held as more objective. Trans theory, based in and politically loyal to trans activism, is '[b]reaking "personal voice" away from the taint of "mere" subjective reflection, and recuperating

embodied knowing as a formally legitimated basis of knowledge production' (Stryker, 2008, p.154-155). It is working to redefine what a 'legitimate' source is and is showcasing how subjective knowledge can enrich theoretical discussion. Trans theory therefore acts to delegitimise the mechanisms by which cis culture uses external recognition to deny the viability of trans identities, and instead places viability within the lived experience and personal identification of the trans person. It is this foregrounding of bodily knowing and personal voice that places trans authorship at the centre of my thesis. In understanding the importance of 'subjective knowledge' I am able to work both with and within the principles of trans theory and activism. However, it must still be acknowledged that external validation is currently the only way in which trans people will gain equal status within society and therefore the only way in which identity violence against trans people will cease.

Butler has discussed the interaction of subjectivity and society. She states that within the existing social order, the 'I' 'becomes, to a certain extent unknowable, threatened with unviability, with becoming undone altogether, *when it no longer incorporates the norm in such a way that makes the "I" fully recognisable*' (Butler, 2004, p.3, my emphasis). Here Butler places the responsibility of cultural recognition with the 'I', requiring each individual to be recognisable through the incorporation of mandated norms. As I stated in the previous chapter, my resignification of viability instead holds that it is society, not the individual, that should be responsible for the recognition of trans identities, or at least not automatically assume a cis identity, on the grounds that each individual identity is viable in and of itself. Furthermore, much like passing, cultural viability is seen as a mechanism of safety, whereby the acknowledgement and acceptance of trans identities is inherently linked with the humanisation of those identities. As discussed in the previous chapter, viability may only be attained through an expansion of the boundaries of normativity that would then allow wider society to recognise and treat trans identities as normative rather than subversive. Butler's externalism, the way in which she foregrounds how identities are created and received within wider society above the internal experiences of gender and individual lived experience, is now considered to be an out-dated approach to trans identities. As McClellan has noted:

earlier iteration[s] of transgender phenomena can be defined as a kind of Butlerian performance studies, more recent articulations have reinforced the importance of the “lived complexity” of gendered bodies in a post 9/11 world where nations define and police the borders of bodies and identities just as they do states and nations (McClellan, 2014).

Such policing may be linked to the cissexist association of trans identities with deception. The connection of 9/11 and border policing indicates a suspicion that trans identities are a method of hiding one’s ‘true’ identity in order to cross cartographical and corporeal borders that would be otherwise inaccessible. This stance is reflected in the bathroom bill in which it is assumed that trans people express their identities only in order to gain them access to the ‘wrong’ bathroom; deception here is linked to predatory motives. Associating trans identities with falsehood carries associations of ill intent, leading to trans people being presented as dangerous. This works to enforce the ‘truth’ and trustworthiness of cis identities, further fortifying the cissexist power structure and dehumanising trans people.

I further suggest that the issues of identity violence can be linked to those of passing. They are both reliant on how trans people are read by their society. The necessity of passing is based on the essentialist nature of society; as such, being read as trans means being read as culturally unviable, which leads to dehumanisation and ultimately violence. In order to rectify this, society requires citable awareness of trans identities, something that can only be achieved through accurate depictions of trans people. The problem of damaging trans tropes within fiction as discussed in the Introduction of this thesis and in the previous chapter, means that the visibility of trans people is often only accessible through cis-filtered narratives. This has also been an issue in the film industry, wherein the majority of trans roles are played by cis actors. Trans activist and actor, Jen Richards, discussed the problematic nature of this in a series of tweets, stating:

‘First, there’s the practical/economic [issue]. It denies actual trans women opportunities, jobs, resources, which hurts entire community’, ‘Having trans people play trans people allows for more informed, subtle, authentic

performance’, ‘Cis audiences reward [cis actors in trans roles] because they see being trans itself as a performance. Trans actors rather perform THE STORY, not our gender’, ‘It will result in violence against trans women. And that is not hyperbole. I mean it literally. Cis men playing trans women leads to death’ (Richards, 2016).

Richards describes how having cis actors playing trans roles reinforces the idea that trans identities are performance and ergo ‘not real’ (Richards, 2016). In perceiving trans identities as false, the assumption assigned to this is that trans women are really men, and trans men really women. Not only does this undo a trans person’s identity, but it also, as Richards states, puts them in danger. While there is a history in film of men dressing up as women, it is usually for comedic effect and it is not expected that the audience believe that they are actually a woman, (see, *Some Like it Hot*, 1959; *Mrs Doubtfire*, 1993; *White Chicks*, 2004). Similarly, the history of women playing men has usually been used in narratives in which a woman disguises herself as a man in order to gain rights or access to something otherwise unattainable due to her sex (see, *Yentl*, 1983; *Shakespeare in Love*, 1998; *She’s the Man*, 2006). In both cases, a common trope is that the audience is able to bear witness to the initial transformation, or, that their deception is revealed. This establishes a canon in which any character’s change of gender is perceived as disguise or comical, which alongside the cultural assumption of the falsity of trans genders leads to belief that a trans person’s gender is a performance and a deception.

The perception that trans identities are false is the basis for the ‘trans panic’ defence, which will be discussed in greater detail in the next section, but which Richards links to the use of cis actors in trans roles. Cisnormative fixed binary gender categories act to naturalise heteronormativity, therefore, if a heterosexual becomes aware of their partner’s transition and views their gender identity as a deception, their own identity as heterosexual is, in their mind, destabilised. This can then lead to the desire to re-establish or reiterate one’s own place in the cis-heteropatriarchy, something that is often achieved through violence against the person that ‘caused’ the initial insecurity. This is because, due to the single story and restrictive trans tropes, ‘culture as a whole still thinks trans women are “really” men. Decades of showing us that way in

[television] shows. It's been internalised', '[a]gain & again cis men play trans women in media with the furthest reach, are rewarded for it, & tell the world trans women are "really" men', therefore, the use of cis actors in trans roles 'exacerbate[s] the cultural belief that trans women are really men, which is the root of violence against us' (Richards, 2016). Here, Richards emphasises that, from an activist perspective, it is not enough to highlight the existence of trans identities, but rather that trans visibility must be based in the promotion of actual trans people, lives and experiences. This further reinforces my choice to use only trans authors within this thesis. I argue that representation re-establishes personhood, leading to viability and therefore lessening the justification of transphobic violence in society. Galtung describes the process behind the validation of violence as a 'causal flow from cultural via structural to direct violence' in which 'culture preaches, teaches, admonishes, eggs on, and dulls us into seeing exploitation and/or repression as normal and natural, or into not seeing them (particularly not exploitation) at all' (Galtung, 1990, p.295). What Galtung argues here is that interpersonal oppression-based violence is based upon the foundations of structural and cultural violence. Such violence does not exist in a cultural vacuum. Referring back to Richards' argument, using cis actors in trans roles reinforces the teachings of dominant culture, whereas enabling trans people to tell their own stories is a way in which to make the exploitation and repression of trans people visible to society and therefore helps to negate the 'causal flow' of violence.

It is important to note that, whilst the underlying structures of identity violence are most prevalent through heteronormative, biologically essentialist, cissexist assumptions, they are also somewhat perpetuated through certain discourses within the queer community. As Tannehill states, '[o]ur society thinks about gender as a binary, and as a result, the LGBTQIA+ movement's messaging is that transgender women are women, and transgender men are men' (Tannehill, 2015). Whilst this is supportive of those trans people who identify strictly within the binary, and has been important to establish a level of trans comprehension in societies that previously had no understanding of trans identities, for non-binary individuals it creates a system in which all aspects of society, cisnormative, heteronormative and queer alike, lack awareness and acceptance of their identities. This is one of the reasons that more contemporary activism has focussed on non-binary representation. This again

highlights the necessity of foregrounding notions of authenticity within lived experience and negating structures that fail to account for all identity options. Furthering Jen Richard's point, Riley Alejandro states:

Most people get their information on trans people from the media and well, we've seen how media treats trans women. So they get their information from transmisogynistic jokes, mainstream porn, and so forth, as opposed from narratives from trans people by trans people (Alejandro, 2015).

What Alejandro emphasises here is the relationship between limited representation and violence, and the way in which this leads to identities that are already restricted being further dehumanised. This then creates a system that is primed to deny the validity of trans identities and instead judge them by its own binary, cissexist assumptions. Recognition of trans identities are denied because there is no coherent framework for comprehending them established within Western culture. Butler's notion of performativity, whilst it has been rightly criticised by trans theory for failing to account for the realities of trans lives, is applicable here. Performativity is described as a citational act that allows others to read a person's gender; as such, a society that fails to acknowledge and/or erases trans people will have no references from which to understand future citations. This is a key reason that a diversity of representation is crucial for trans people, alongside giving the reader responsibility for the accurate acknowledgement of a person's identity. Refusing to recognise trans identities as legitimate and then further erasing them by having no citational reference from which to understand them leads to a circular argument whereby recognition ultimately becomes the location of power, and as such a location of potential violence.

Viability policing is based on the citational nature of gender and its 'naturalisation' through repetition which means that '[t]ranssexuality threatens the established order because it unsettles the stable ground of gender and challenges the binary categories that underpin heteropatriarchy' (Parker, 2007, p.324). As such, trans identities become a threat to the stability of cisgender's naturalised dominance, locating it within its constructedness. This threat has an impact not only on sex and gender, but all aspects of social life that are based on the assumption of their concrete binary; sexuality,

infant socialisation, segregated bathrooms, gendered language, and so on, all become questionable, alienable. Purely through their existence, trans identities destabilise the cis-heteropatriarchy, making such identities a source of fear and as such a force to be controlled. This control is perpetuated through the naturalisation of cis identities and the dehumanisation of those who identify as trans. This is achieved through a discourse in which the binary is re-established as concrete, and those beyond or outside of it, instead of proving its fallacy are instead represented as being false. This is seen in the common use of narratives and tropes in which trans identities are linked to deception, as mentioned regarding Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues* (1993) and is further witnessed by the 'trans panic' defence in which the accusation of falsehood is at the forefront of the argument in order to justify the use of violence against trans people.

Placing recognition in such a position of power within cultural understanding and discourses of trans issues makes it a fundamentally important aspect of trans lives. Establishing the recognition of trans identities as valid and ensuring their cultural viability means overcoming legal and individual prejudices. Lee and Kwan argue that combating patriarchal structures that covertly encourage violence against trans people, particularly trans women, would lessen the violence they face and would undermine the effectiveness of the trans panic defence, which will be discussed next (2014, p.123). Additionally, they argue that:

Such reform must take place in the court of public opinion as well as in the specific courtroom where the trans panic argument is being asserted. [...]

Therefore, television shows, movies, and plays may be more effective at getting this message across to the public than the criminal courtroom (Lee and Kwan, 2014, p.123).

Lee and Kwan locate popular culture as a fundamental area from which to establish trans identities as recognisable and therefore increasing their cultural viability. Establishing trans identities as citable enables wider culture to understand them as recognisable within all cultural contexts, but also establishes possibility models for other trans people, as discussed in the previous chapter, having an awareness that there are others like you is a key aspect of both understanding the self and building a

community. This additionally highlights that the novels discussed in this thesis are a key part of cultural output and as such work towards achieving the goals put forward by Lee and Kwan. These novels, in being by and about trans people are a key piece of evidence for the 'court of public opinion'. They humanise trans people and provide citable examples of trans lives that may act to improve cultural intelligibility and therefore work to lessen identity violence in society.

## **4.2: Physical Violence**

As has been discussed in the previous chapters and regarding many of the novels studied so far in this thesis, physical violence is a key concern and recurring trope. In Western society, the disproportionate number of murders, especially of trans women of colour, highlights a pandemic of transphobic violence. Trans people are also far more likely to be violently assaulted, 'one out of every two transgender individuals is likely to be physically attacked at some point in his or her lifetime because of his or her transgender status' (Lee and Kwan, 2014, p.96). Such levels of violence are indicative of a society in which trans lives are considered less valuable than cis lives and is arguably a product of a society that views such violence as excusable or warranted, as discussed above. The cultural dominance of such a view is evidenced by the legal precedent set by the 'trans panic' defence, in which:

A murder defendant claiming trans panic alleges that he became upset and lost control of his actions upon discovering that he engaged in sexual relations with someone whom he thought was female, but was biologically male. Essential to the claim of trans panic is the argument that the average heterosexual man would have been provoked into a heat of passion if he had discovered that the person with whom he had been sexually intimate was not a "real" female, but a person with male genitalia pretending to be a woman (Lee and Kwan, 2014, p.105-106).

The legality of this defence is evidence of the transphobic nature of the fundamental structures of Western society. Additionally, whilst this statement fails to account for the murder of and violence against both post-surgery trans women and all trans men, it still highlights a number of key concerns. The premise of the trans panic defence is

based in biological essentialism and cissexism, as discussed in chapter 1, whereby the gender assigned at birth is considered to be the ultimate truth of a person's identity, irrespective of their personal gender identification, expression and lived experience. As such their identity is considered to be false and their living of it deceitful. This establishes a cissexist legal precedent whereby trans individuals are devalued and disinherited from the same legal protections afforded to cis individuals. The way in which this treatment is parsed through society is explained by Butler's supposition that:

On the level of discourse, certain lives are not considered lives at all, they cannot be humanised; they fit no dominant frame for the human and their dehumanisation [...] then gives rise to a physical violence that in some sense delivers the message of dehumanisation which is already at work in the culture (Butler, 2004, p.25).

Butler's work here echoes Galtung's in that it notes various mechanisms of violence coming together to validate one another. As seen in the previous three chapters, cultural viability is currently based on essentialist, binary assumptions which play out on the canvas of the body through passing. Jess in *Stone Butch Blues* (Feinberg, 1993), faces physical violence due to the visible nature of their gender identity, as does Click in *Roving Pack* (Lowrey, 2012) and a number of other characters discussed within this thesis. Their lives are not considered to be viable because they do not conform to the society within the texts' accepted norms. Similarly, in contemporary Western society, the denial of the validity of trans identities, through biological or aesthetic arguments, leads to trans people being dehumanised. Dehumanisation leads to their human rights being contested and violence against them being considered acceptable or excusable due to their identity. Trans panic, in its existence as a legal defence shows that society, even at an institutional level places the responsibility of social recognition with the individual:

For defendants asserting the trans panic defence, the transgender woman transgresses gender norms by assuming a female identity when she was born

with male anatomy. The defendant punishes her act of transgression by killing her' (Lee and Kwan, 2014, p.113).

Claiming that this is a legally acceptable excuse for murder explicitly locates the superstructure within the transphobic view that the 'transgression' of gender norms is an act worthy of extreme violence. As such, all other legislative protocol that acts in favour of trans identities is diminished by the overall systematic depreciation of trans lives. This legal precedent furthermore locates itself within cissexism and homophobia, in that it states that '[t]he trans panic defence rests, in part, on the idea that the victim robbed the defendant of his masculinity by tricking him into having sex with a man *pretending* to be a woman' (Lee and Kwan, 2014, p.111, my emphasis). In line with Jen Richard's point about the use of cis actors, the use of 'pretending' here suggests that a trans person is defined by the designated sex at birth, therefore acting to disregard and devalue other legislature that allows trans people to legally identify as their correct gender. Allowing someone to change their official documentation to be legally recognised as their gender is later undercut by rereading them into the gender they were assigned at birth. As such, failure of recognition and denial of identity are built into the societal discourse surrounding trans identity, foregrounding them above personal identity.

What the trans panic defence highlights, beyond the violence that trans people face, is the restrictive nature of gender categories and how they are used to monitor and regulate behaviour, not just identity. Speaking on restrictive norms, Butler suggests that trans identities may be used to broaden the understanding of who may be understood to be viably human, and in doing so implies that this is only of use if it also benefits existences beyond trans identities:

altering [the] norms that decide normative human morphology give[s] differential "reality" to different kinds of humans as a result [...] affirm[s] that transgendered lives have a potential and actual impact on political life at its most fundamental level, that is, who counts as a human, and what norms govern the appearance of "real" humanness (Butler, 2004, p.28).

Whilst this promotes the idea of broadening normative gendering beyond the binary, it is also indicative of queer theory's use of trans identities as a lever through which to challenge borders more generally. Whilst the amendment of the boundaries of physical/biological normativity is something that trans theory promotes and that has the potential for impact on a number of other body and identity-based groups such as the disability and intersex rights movements. Butler's work fails to foreground trans identities as fundamental benefactors of such a change and instead considers them to be the facilitators of change. This again acts to deny trans people their personhood, reducing their subjectivity to methodology. It makes them both a mechanism and a reason for changing the current understandings of sex and gender, but does not allow them to guide or benefit from their work.

The mechanisms behind violence specifically aimed against trans people are somewhat based in the constructedness of both sex and gender, something that has been discussed by a number of critics, including Butler. Highlighting the fallacy of biological sex, Nataf notes that 'modern medical research and theory suggest that the categories of woman and man are not in fact biologically opposite or closed, but that people fall somewhere along a continuum' (Nataf, 1996, p.15). As such, the illusion of 'natural' binary sex and gender categories is premised upon contested theories of biology. However, the cis-heteropatriarchy is predicated on the stability of these binary gender categories, and as such, their disavowal would undermine these power structures. It is for this reason that gender identities are so strictly policed. Stryker discusses this, stating that:

Bodies are rendered meaningful only through some culturally and historically specific modes of grasping their physicality that transforms flesh into a useful artefact [...] Gendering is the initial step in this transformation, inseparable from the process of forming an identity by means of which we're fitted to a system of exchange in a heterosexual economy' (Stryker, 1994, p.249-250).

Becoming a 'useful artefact' or culturally viable is policed by the power structure through the creation of norms and taboos. As such '[g]ender becomes something one must "confess" through social signifiers that may only be interpreted within the

existing social order' (Gagne, Tewksbury and McGaughey, 1997, p.479). Complying with the existing social order means complying with the norms created by the ruling power. As trans narratives do not exist within such norms they cannot be adequately interpreted using them. In making themselves visible, they hold the power to destabilise binary and essentialist assumptions, and as such have been systematically denaturalised in order to prevent such destabilisation. Rather than changing the way in which society views gender as a whole, trans people have instead been dehumanised.

This lack of societal recognition or acceptance is presented alongside the proposition that '[t]ranssexuals in particular are seen to uphold society's gender status quo by changing their bodies to fit desired gender roles' (Nataf, 1996, p.44). As such, trans individuals, particularly transsexuals in this case, are accused of both not truly being their gender, but additionally of upholding gender as an institution. This double standard locates trans identities simultaneously within and outside of the boundaries of accepted cis genders. In locating trans identity as parallel to 'acceptable' gender identities it is within sight of and therefore beholden to acceptable gender whilst being denied the ability to ever become a part of it. The identity violence of parallelisation is partially achieved through a cultural history of 'pathologising of transgenderism as GID', gender identity disorder, which 'encourages prejudice' (Nagoshi and Brzuzy, 2010, p.438). Such medicalisation means that trans genders are viewed against the background of cis genders but deemed as a disordered interpretation of those genders rather than the authentic identification as such.

In line with Galtung's work on violence, it has been noted that '[s]ociety uses multiple methods of positive and negative reinforcement, including legal, religious, and cultural practices, to enforce adherence to these gender roles' (Nagoshi and Brzuzy, 2010, p.433). One of these cultural practices is the media, in which a lack of diverse representation and the proliferation of negative and damaging portrayals of trans people in the majority of cultural output sends a clear cultural message that to be trans is to be lesser. This directly impacts trans lives. As Sonny Nordmarken notes, '[t]he translation of stereotype into action can have far-reaching, overtly oppressive, systemic effects, from pathologization to murder' (Nordmarken in Stryker and Currah,

2014, p.132). This emphasises how cultural output is a key aspect of cultural violence, and therefore a foundational aspect of direct violence and identity policing.

Society's prejudice means that the substantiated fear of violence can lead to people being unable to transition to their true gender, something that has been proven to lead to distress, depression and suicide, whereas '[m]ental health was rated as being better post-transition than [sic] previously' (McNeil *et al*, 2012, p.83). Illustrating this, Alejandro has stated that '[d]espite knowing I was trans for a long time [...] I kept repressing my feelings due to the reactions of those around me' (Alejandro, 2015). Highlighting transition itself as a key area of mental health must be considered alongside the implications that transition has on a person's lived experience, as seen in chapter 2's discussion of passing. I will now discuss how these multifaceted elements of trans violence are represented in two novels, *Nevada* (2013) by Imogen Binnie, and Rae Spoon's *First Spring Grass Fire* (2012). These texts each illustrate in different ways the issues of dehumanisation, victimisation and denial of identity, and the subsequent impact of these on the protagonists' lived experience.

### **4.3: Nevada**

Imogen Binnie's *Nevada* (2013) is written in two parts. Part 1 follows the life of Maria, a queer trans punk living in Brooklyn. Having transitioned several years previously, Maria's story is one of daily life, rather than that of transition. This is important because it acts to counter the traditional objectifying narrative that focusses more on transition than personhood. The structure of the novel echoes the narrative, it is split into chapters of varying length, (some of which being less than a page long), in which snippets of action or introspection are interspersed with longer chapters about her day. This reflects the everyday nature of the narrative in which the banality of daily life is just as important as the political aspects of existing as trans in a cissexist society. At the opening of the novel Maria has a job at a bookshop and a girlfriend with whom she lives. The narrative covers her daily life, her break-up with Steph, the loss of her job and her eventual decision to drive from Brooklyn to Nevada. Part 2 has multiple narrators; James, who lives in Nevada, works at a supermarket and struggles with his gender identity; Nicole, his girlfriend; and Maria who meets James during her travels. Maria and James have a number of conversations about gender and transition, which

function as didactical for the reader as Maria describes her childhood gender repression and the way society understands gender. The novel concludes with James leaving Maria at a casino, having decided not to think any more about transition, and returning home with Nicole.

In an introspective chapter at the beginning of the novel, Maria discusses her experience of becoming and being a trans woman. In an effort to contextualise her experiences, she describes the way that society perceives trans people as being the product of 'mystification, misconception and mystery' (Binnie, 2013, p.4). She goes on to state that '[p]eople tend to assume that trans women are either drag queens and loads of trashy fun, or else sad, pathetic and deluded pervy straight men, at least, until they save up the money and get their Sex Change Operations, at which point they become just like every other woman. Or something?' (Binnie, 2013, p.4). These quotations raise a number of issues; first Maria highlights society's fundamental lack of understanding regarding trans women and then goes on to show the impact this has on their representation. She also raises the issue of economic status and surgery by discussing the need to save up the money for treatment. The latter is something that is perhaps more relevant in the American context wherein there is no free healthcare. However, this may also be applied to the British context where long NHS waiting lists lead to those who can afford it seeking private healthcare in order to expedite transition. Maria also describes the essentialist nature of society, wherein once a person's body matches cisgender expectations they become 'just like every other woman [or man]', suggesting that previously they were not perceived as such. However, her use of a rhetorical question emphasises a disbelief in the accepting nature of society even for those who have undergone surgery and therefore live up to cisnormative expectations. As such, from the offset of the novel, Binnie focuses on society's fundamental cissexism and subsequent identity violence against trans people.

Maria's awareness of society's lack of acceptance greatly affects her lived experience. Although she has a job, she still expresses concerns about her employment. She began working at the bookstore before she transitioned and as such there are members of staff who know that she is trans. Consequently, Maria is constantly afraid that they 'might at any point tell any of the new people who come to work with her that she is

trans, and then she has to do damage control' (Binnie, 2013, p.6). This may be linked to concerns about being read as trans, as discussed in chapter 2, something that can then lead to the dehumanisation and vilification described in this chapter. Maria's assumption that there would be a need for 'damage control' is evidence that she expects people to be unaccepting of her because of her identity. She describes 'what it's like to be a trans woman: never being sure who knows you're trans or what that knowledge would even mean to them', describing it as 'totally exhaust[ing]' (Binnie, 2013, p.6). This constant fear of repercussions shows the inescapable impact that society has on trans lived experience. Her exhaustion is the product of identity violence, where she both expects and fears intolerance of her identity, alongside the subsequent threat of physical violence. As such, even without direct action by others, society's norms lead to constant self-policing. This is achieved externally through identity and physical violence, and internally through the fear thereof, making it a self-sustaining method of control.

Maria describes living in a perpetual 'sense of removal' (Binnie, 2013, p.9), of being separate from and distant to other people, which I assign as being due to the identity violence she experiences. She goes on to say that this sense of removal is because 'I learned to police myself pretty fiercely when I was a tiny little baby, internalising social norms and trying to keep myself safe from them at the same time' (Binnie, 2013, p.9). Maria's citation of the concept of safety here differs from the way it is used regarding passing. Whereas safety is usually associated with being read as cis, remaining stealth, or hiding one's trans status, here Maria discusses the danger of this. She states that 'internalising social norms' is hazardous to her, that in order to avoid physical and identity violence she must live within the norms, but that the norms themselves have a damaging impact on her identity. In trying to both embody and distance herself from the norms of society, Maria is forced to choose which safety she most needs, external or internal. The impact of this conflict echoes through the rest of her life, leaving her removed from wider society. Linking social norms to danger again showcases the damage of self-policing wherein society's enforcement of the notion of 'normal' as a binary concept leads to both the fear and actuality of physical and identity violence. Furthermore, within this quotation, the exaggeration of 'tiny little baby' acts to highlight how society enforces gender from an early age, sometimes even prenatally

when sex can be discerned via ultrasound at 18-21 weeks (NHS, 2015) and the child is raised into particular gender norms. In placing emphasis on this, Binnie explicitly emphasises the way in which Maria's conflicting need for internal and external safety began as soon as, if not before, she was consciously aware of herself. This also indicates that identity violence is predicated not only on the active refusal of trans identities, but also through the lack of representation and erasure that leads to self-policing as the only option. The identity violence of cultural misrepresentation meant that as a teenager, Maria 'hadn't figured out she was trans. All she knew about trans people was all anybody knows about trans people before they start looking: that they are all psychos with big hair who trick straight men into having sex with them' (Binnie, 2013, p.15). This refers to the circumstances surrounding the trans panic defence and shows that it is not simply a legal precedent but also built into the wider cultural understanding of trans identities. Tebbutt describes society's 'tendency to fetishize and look through, rather than look at and listen to transgender and intersex people' (Tebbutt, 2012, p.505), meaning that there are rarely any accurate or sympathetic representations of trans people within cultural output. The foregrounding of fetishization over accurate portrayals leads to and reinforces the mechanisms behind identity violence. Cultural output as a key conductor of social knowledge holds a great deal of power over representation and therefore self-identification, and subsequent identity and physical violence. Understanding that representation in cultural output is fundamentally important to improving social understanding and reducing cultural violence against oppressed groups.

The lack of accurate, sympathetic and diverse cultural output is what led to Maria's self-policing and contributes to her sense of isolation. This is reflected in her interactions with others, but additionally in the way that she connects with the world; Maria notes that she 'always sympathises with the monster' in horror films (Binnie, 2013, p.22), indicating that she sees herself as the outsider rather than the protagonist. A monster is defined as '[a] large, ugly, and frightening imaginary creature', 'inhumanly cruel or wicked', '[a] rude or badly behaved person, typically a child', and 'congenitally malformed or mutant' (Oxford Dictionaries, 2018). As such, a society that dehumanizes trans people and makes them feel akin to monsters is a

society that does not believe in their validity, finds them frightening, infantilises them and considers them to be moral deviants. As Butler has stated:

Certain humans are recognized as less than human, and that form of qualified recognition does not lead to a viable life. Certain humans are *not recognized as human at all*, and that leads to yet another order of unlivable life (Butler, 2004, p.2, my emphasis).

In living as something other than cisgender, Maria feels that has entered into the monstrous and as such the unviable. All of these beliefs are reinforced by negative or misinformed portrayals, all act to dehumanise trans people, and therefore all allow, excuse and even encourage violence against trans people. Throughout the narrative it is clear that this is something that Maria, and later James, have internalised.

Maria is aware of the political aspects of her identity and notes that she has read feminist theory and Judith Butler (Binnie, 2013, p.23, 26). When discussing the issue of gender politics, Maria states, '[e]ventually you can't help but figure out that, while gender is a construct, so is a traffic light, and if you ignore either of them, you get hit by cars' (Binnie, 2013, p.26). This is reflective of the way in which trans theory grounds itself in lived experience. Whilst theoretically gender is a construct, its impact upon society and people's lives is very much corporeal. As Gagney, Tewksbury and McGaughey have noted:

To help other individual transgenderists, it was necessary to work at social change. Without changing the cultural context, the social infrastructure, and the idiom in which transgenderists are perceived and alternative genders are achieved, it is highly unlikely that the experiences and identities of individual transgenderists can be "normalised," without placing them back within a binary system (Gagney, Tewksbury and McGaughey, 1997, p.503).

Living within a culture means being held accountable to its norms. Whilst norms may be constructs, they are still used and perpetuated. As such, in order to reveal their constructed nature, the change must occur at a societal level by those who hold

privilege gained through such constructs. As mentioned in the previous chapter, this may be somewhat achieved through improved visibility and accurate, diverse representation. Additionally, whilst discussing constructivism, Maria again links society to violence in stating that ignoring social constructs leads to injury. The constant reiteration of the danger she faces as a trans woman highlights the relentless nature of societal violence and the impact that it has on her lived experience.

Further highlighting the way in which trans theory is directly related to lived experience, Maria continues to point towards philosophies upon which the theory is based. When reviewing the origins of personal trans identity, she states that she did not care '[w]hether it was something in my brain from before I was born [...] or it was something I picked up developmentally' (Binnie, 2013, p.41). Instead she foregrounds the issue of lived experience, stating:

I'm trans. I have been trans since I was little. There's this dumb thing where trans women feel like we all have to prove that we're totally trans as fuck and there's no doubt in our minds that we're Really, Truly Trans. It comes from the fact that you have to prove that you're trans to psychologists and doctors: the burden is entirely on your own shoulders to prove that you're Really Trans in order to get any treatment at all (Binnie, 2013, p.41).

Here Maria returns the issue of gender theory to lived experience and identity violence. Describing the 'burden' of proof being on the trans person echoes my previous assertion that the onus should be on the reader, not the person being read, to correctly read a person's identity. To place the 'burden' on the oppressed person being read by an individual or system that has and assigns cultural capital is an act of identity violence. In this case, the identity violence lays in having to 'prove' that you are the gender that you are; this is something that cisgender people do not have to do, and as such is an act of oppression targeted only at trans people. Natalie Reed describes this regarding access to hormonal and surgical treatment, stating '[o]ne of the most insidious aspects of gatekeeping is the way that it demands we play along [...] and not dare openly question the process from within lest we risk' a subsequent denial of treatment (Reed, 2012). This identity violence goes beyond the denial of a person's

selfhood and into institutional pathologisation and dehumanisation from the infrastructure charged with helping them. Maria further states that:

Pretty much you have to prove that you're totally normal and straight and not queer at all, so that if they let you transition you will be a normal het woman who doesn't freak anybody out, and so we often, as individuals, internalise these things, and then we, as a community, often reinforce them (Binnie, 2013, p.42).

Here, Binnie uses Maria's internal monologue to emphasise the intersectional issues of gender and sexuality where both are considered to be binary with one side being normative and the other deviant. The identity policing in this particular medical context involves ensuring that a person is restricted to one axis of apparent aberration.

As well as experiencing identity violence within her wider society, Maria also describes facing identity violence within her local queer community and how it impacts on her life. Similar to the 'womyn born womyn' policies of second wave feminist groups mentioned previously, Maria notes the 'No Bio-Cock' policy of the 'lesbian sex parties that happen in the city' (Binnie, 2013, p.90). This biologically essentialist stance means 'No Trans Women. Or, optimistically, Trans Women: Keep Your Pants On. Meanwhile trans guys are welcome to brandish whatever cocks they want' (Binnie, 2013, p.90). She states that 'bio-cock has become shorthand for the fact that trans women aren't sexually welcome in any communities anywhere' (Binnie, 2013, p.90). This essentialism-based identity violence reflects wider social norms. Additionally, the inclusion of trans men in that lesbian-specific space also reinforces biological essentialism. Accepting trans men within lesbian spaces implies that, in the minds of those present, they do not count as men. As such, whilst trans men may be more accepted in such a situation, it is still to the detriment of their identity and is another form of identity violence.

Throughout the text Maria mentions how other people's restrictive politics have interacted with her life, and thus emphasises the importance of trans theory's basis in lived experience and subsequent ability to overcome real-life problems. One example

of this is when she states, 'if somebody is super-stoked to use me as an example of how gender isn't real, or if anybody ever wants to talk to me about how my body is an example of genderqueerness at its most integrally crucial [...] then that person can fuck off' (Binnie, 2013, p.102). Alongside her previous statements regarding the realities of her embodied femininity and how theory often fails to account for it, 'you get hit by cars' (Binnie, 2013, p.26), this statement highlights the failings of theoretical uses of binary trans identities to lessen gender boundaries. Her inclusion of the word 'use' and the implication that the speaker believes that they know more about her body than she does acts to highlight the more generalised stances of feminist and queer theory regarding gender, as discussed in the introduction to this thesis, whereas trans theory is based in individual experience. Nataf notes that:

seeing the diversity of transgendered people and not just the stereotypes is how feminists, lesbians and gays, differently abled people and other oppressed or marginalised people will recognise trans people as allies instead of opponents (Nataf, 1996, p.42).

It is not just wider society that problematises trans identity and commits identity violence, but other marginalised communities also. Nataf's work here highlights how more diverse trans representations can undo damaging stereotypes and foster better working relationships between oppressed communities. Trans theory's politics of inclusion has established it as working at the foreground of intersectionality as dual axes of oppression are almost default for trans people. Even someone that would usually seem to be at the cultural apex, that being a white, middle-class, able-bodied man, would still face oppression for being trans. Therefore, it is arguably the case that all trans women are oppressed both for being trans and for being women, and may be further oppressed for being black, poor, or queer. Furthermore, Maria discusses how the issue of intersectionality is additionally linked to passing and therefore linked to the potential for violence:

it would be nice to believe that you could just exist, just be some true, honest, essential self. But you only really get to have a true honest essential self if

you're white, male, het, and able-bodied. Otherwise your body has all these connotations and you don't get the benefit of the doubt. (Binnie, 2013, p.124).

Instead, Maria had to change 'the way I present my body and my actions' in order to be read in the way she wishes to be read. This further emphasises how an essentialist society enforces passing in order to avoid both physical and identity violence which acts as a form of identity violence in and of itself. Chase Strangio notes the way that he is protected by his cultural position, stating, '[i]magine what the cost is to those trans people who don't carry the powerful shield from systematic violence that comes with whiteness, masculinity, a legal education, a job doing LGBT work, at an organisation with resources and cultural respect and recognition' (Strangio, 2015). Those who do not have the protection that he does from these cultural positions are likely to face far more violence, something that increases with every intersection they overlap.

As seen in the previous three chapters, society's impact on trans lived experience is enabled by biologically essentialist assumptions that are reinforced by cultural output and read onto the trans body. In line with this Maria firmly places the blame for identity and therefore physical violence with society. She states:

she figured out she was such a mess not because she was trans but because being trans is so stigmatised. If you could leave civilisation for a year, like live in an abandoned shopping mall out in the desert, giving yourself injections of oestrogen, working on your voice, figuring out how to dress yourself all over again and meditating eight hours a day on gendered socialisation, and then get bottom surgery as a reward, it would be pretty easy to transition (Binnie, 2013, p.42).

Here Maria talks about both passing and breaking gender norms<sup>8</sup>. Whereas queer theory would use such an opportunity to break down gender entirely, Maria wishes to transition and pass whilst simultaneously breaking down ingrained 'gendered socialisation'. She suggests that an easy transition would only be possible outside of

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<sup>8</sup> Whilst subtly referencing Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve* (1977) and the desert city of Beulah.

culture's influence. However, she notes that even once having transitioned she would still be subjugated should her trans status be discovered. In highlighting the fact that being trans is not inherently difficult but is made so by society's treatment of trans people and a lack of access to transition support, she further iterates the impact that society and transition can have on trans people's mental health. She would not be a 'mess' if it were not for the way society treats trans people. This also further reaffirms her suggestion at the beginning of the novel where she cites the space between society's apparent acceptance of post-operative trans people and the reality of their continued lack of acceptance.

Maria's desire to be free from societal surveillance while she transitions is in part due to the constant threat of violence that Maria feels as a trans woman. This is exemplified when she goes to a café at 5am before work. She is concerned about the other patrons, particularly those who are drunk, stating that, '[t]hese are situations where, if you are trans, you are going to get read as trans, and it's going to be a situation' (Binnie, 2013, p.49). In this case, her fear of a 'situation' is the fear of direct violence. She walks to the back of the café to 'hide' and remarks at the fact that '[n]obody notices her [...] when they used to, they were so vocal about it that still, to this day, you worry' (Binnie, 2013, p.49). This reinforces the idea presented in chapter 2, that passing is a mechanism of safety and what Nataf notes, stating:

gender is such a habit. It is critical to the way we treat other people and the way we behave, but the mechanism remains largely unconscious until someone transgresses, which sends immediate shockwaves that something dangerous and unnatural is happening (Nataf, 1996, p.22).

As such, passing, being read as cisgender, means that Maria creates no 'shockwaves' within her environment and as such is not confronted. She has experiential evidence that she would be met with violence should she be read as trans, as she had been in the past. Her uncertainty about other people's reactions to her, also witnessed at her workplace, means that she is constantly concerned about the threat of danger. Maria discusses her previous efforts to reduce her 'shockwaves' in order to reduce the likelihood of facing violence:

You can't help but wonder what people see when they look at you. Androgynous fag? To be real that's a look she tried for when she first started transitioning, which doesn't disrupt strangers' worldview much and theoretically they will just ignore you (Binnie, 2013, p.49).

Here, Maria's awareness that being read as trans would potentially lead to physical violence means that she was forced to police herself, denying her the ability to live authentically. Her effort to exist within accepted social norms was an effort to avoid both physical and cultural violence and as such was in itself a form of identity violence. In trying to position herself as an 'androgynous fag', Maria highlights her awareness of the varying levels of oppression that minority groups face. According to Maria's statement above, homosexuality is more oppressed than heterosexuality, androgyny is more oppressed than presenting in a binary fashion, and being trans is more oppressed than both of these together. This also works to reiterate the insidious nature of self-policing, in which it becomes incumbent upon the trans person to avoid violence rather than the responsibility of society not to initiate violence.

Maria additionally raises the important issue of internalisation, wherein the pervasive nature of cultural norms and lack of possibility models that expose their falsehood lead to trans people understanding themselves through the lens of the cis-heteropatriarchy. As Stryker notes:

The most basic act of normativising disciplinarity [...] is rooted in a more fundamental and culturally pervasive disavowal of intrinsically diverse modes of bodily being as the lived ground of all knowing and all knowledge production (Stryker, 2008, p.154).

This disavowal of anything outside of the cisnormative, able-bodied, white, male body is an intersectional issue that plays out most violently upon those who least fit such an archetype. The violence against trans women of colour highlights this most thoroughly. For Maria, even without taking into consideration external violence, this is enacted through the internalisation of cisnormative values that lead to self-policing.

The constant threat of external violence means that Maria heralds the internet as a place of safety due to its anonymity, its separation from the problematic nature of the body and the ability to find other trans people to speak with (Binnie, 2013, p.59, 61, 62):

When you come out as trans, it's hard to tell [the people in your life] For whatever reason, though, it's pretty easy to tell some people from Alaska or California or, y'know, England. In this weird way, Internet message boards, livejournal, all these things feel like they're a safe way to talk about being trans (Binnie, 2013, p.61).

These message boards are a place of community for Maria, where she is able to discuss being trans with others that share her experience in some way, as discussed in the previous chapter. Furthermore, she notes that '[i]t's maybe the best thing about the Internet, how you can access information you need safely and anonymously' (Binnie, 2013, p.62). The association of anonymity with safety is similar to the use of passing as a method of safety. It reiterates her previous statement that the danger of a trans identity lies in the awareness of others. Being trans in and of itself is not dangerous, it is the interaction with society that leads to risk. Maria's fear of violence leads to a fear of talking to others about herself anywhere other than the internet, 'I talk about being trans all the time! Just not out loud' (Binnie, 2013, p.191). It should be noted here that the Internet also has the power to be a place of transphobic violence, something seen across multiple social networking sites.

The generalised fear of the potential for violence in any given situation is exemplified when, whilst travelling, she meets James, who she suspects may transition to female once he has processed and accepted his identity. Although she initially intends to talk to James about this suspicion, when he asks if she is trans she finds herself highly anxious, something she ascribes to the fact that '[w]hen she was first transitioning, people would give her shit'. Furthermore, she states:

it should be a value-neutral question [...] In a world that was less fucked up about trans people, it would be a perfectly legitimate question: maybe kind of rude, like do you dye your grey hair or something. But in this world that question was making her hyperventilate (Binnie, 2013, p.190).

This once again locates the fear of violence with society's prejudice, acknowledging it as a worldwide problem, rather than situation-specific. This widespread denial of trans cultural viability leads to an inherent fear of violence should her transness be foregrounded. Furthermore, as mentioned in previous chapters, there are mandates on how to be 'the right kind of trans', as argued by the HBS community and by those who uphold passing as an ultimate sign of trans worth. As Maria notes, 'when you're a trans woman, patriarchal mandates about presentation get extra twisted up with narratives of disclosure, validity as a human being, violence, the possibility of ever being found attractive' (Binnie, 2013, p.191). Therefore, avoiding violence through passing or through submitting to power structures, as seen with the gatekeeping of medical transition, is often simultaneously an act of personal identity violence.

James, having not yet considered that he may be trans, considers himself to be a 'pervert' because he enjoys wearing women's clothes (Binnie, 2013, p.150). Maria and James have a number of conversations about what it means to be trans. Assuaging some of his doubts, Maria tells James that he would not need to drastically change his personality and style to fit the cultural norm, telling him that trans women can still be 'dirtbags or punkers or weirdos or dykes or radicals' (Binnie, 2013, p.193-200).

Discussions between Maria and James also acts as potentially didactic for the reader. In having Maria explain James' misapprehensions to him, she is additionally therefore highlighting these issues to the reader. James' self-diagnosis also acts to emphasise the ways in which a lack of trans visibility and awareness leads to harmful understandings of trans identities and subsequently to personal identity violence. It also further reinforces the devaluation of trans subjectivities and the subsequent foregrounding of damaging cis-heteropatriarchal norms.

The rolling impact of physical and identity violence can be seen throughout *Nevada*. Maria's fear of physical violence and her experiences of identity violence interrupt her

life every day; '[s]he's like, Jesus, can I get twenty minutes where I don't think about being trans, please?' (Binnie, 2013, p.49-50). Her interactions with society are largely based in the awareness that she is at constant risk of aggression, dehumanisation and viability policing. James acts to highlight the violence of representation, both in the lack of it and the frequency of negative portrayals. In having no cultural references through which to understand himself, he self-polices, performing identity violence upon himself, which leaves him feeling like 'a fucked up fake human' (Binnie, 2013, p.232). The lack of accurate trans representation in James' life echoes what Maria describes of her youth leads to similar negative consequences in that they each describe a sense of removal from their own identities and wider society. Maria's self-policing and fear of violence make her life unlivable in a way that cis people do not experience, and her wish to help James avoid this highlights the impact that community can have upon personal identity violence.

#### **4.4: *First Spring Grass Fire***

*First Spring Grass Fire* by Rae Spoon (2012) is a fictional text that features a non-binary protagonist also called Rae, although the text is defined as fiction rather than autobiography or auto-fiction. A non-linear *bildungsroman*, *First Spring Grass Fire* follows the protagonist as they grow up in a highly religious family controlled by a schizophrenic father. Unlike the other texts in this thesis, Rae's transness is implied but not mentioned until page 123 of 137, and then only parenthetically. Similar to *Nevada*, this text undoes the traditional narrative in which transition is at the forefront. The effect of this is to highlight the identity violence Rae faces from their highly religious, cis-heteronormative family and local community. The revelation of both Rae's name and gender identity towards the end of the novel acts as a literary device that emphasises the protagonist's slow realisation of, and eventual connection with, their identity. As such, the novel's structure echoes Rae's personal development, even in spite of its non-linear progression. It also echoes the fact that Rae keeps their identity as both trans and gay hidden throughout the text due to their fear of violent repercussions.

Within the society of the text, being homosexual is something repeatedly described as being unacceptable, as 'sinful', and is described by Rae's mother as a punishable act;

'they were going to hell [...] God made AIDS to punish gay people' (Spoon, 2012, p.120). The enforced heteronormativity of both Rae's family, church and town is evidenced throughout:

The thing about Calgary was that boys didn't need to be gay to get called "faggot." You only had to do something a little out of the ordinary, like grow your hair long or play the acoustic guitar. And if you were a girl, all you had to do was cut your hair short or stand up to boys and you would be called a dyke (Spoon, 2012, p.116-117).

The particularly rigid cultural norms of their town is doubly enforced by their church, in which even cis-heteronormative acts are policed. This is achieved through abstinence workshops (Spoon, 2012, p.85), and the enforcement of marriage as sacrosanct. When Rae's father's regular abuse and schizophrenic outbursts lead to their mother trying to leave him, her sisters and church community state that '[i]t was her duty as a wife to stick by him' (Spoon, 2012, p.91). The social policing placed upon someone who otherwise embodies the norms of that society is indicative of the incommensurate policing that Rae could expect from that community should they come out as trans. As such, the violence within this novel is very much concentrated in identity violence, whereby Rae's identity is not simply dismissed, but denied any acknowledgement at all.

Beyond the individual aspects of the violence they face, Rae highlights the impact that it has on their ability to find or build a community, particularly at school, noting that '[t]here was danger in being different and there was safety in numbers. That's why the straight kids who were grunge were treated the same as the gay kids. We were all fags in the eyes of our school' (Spoon, 2012, p.117). As with Natalie Reed's discussion of unity through oppression, the narrow definition of normativity in Rae's local community makes victims of a diverse range of people who then group together for safety when they would otherwise have nothing in common. Whilst being 'grunge' is typically at little of risk facing identity violence, within the community that Rae lives they are considered another non-normative group youth sub-culture worthy of dehumanisation. Whilst being grunge is a choice to engage with a sub-culture, wear

certain clothes and listen to certain music, being gay or trans are not. As such, whilst in this particular situation and textual context the 'grunge kids' and the 'gay kids' are presented as being equally in danger, the actual danger faced by the gay and trans individuals is much more pervasive. The oppression of trans people spans structural, cultural and direct forms of violence, whereas the violence the 'grunge kids' face in this text is only ever direct, one-on-one violence that is enabled by the specific youth sub-culture of the town. Whilst the experience of these types of violence may feel similarly disruptive to the individuals experiencing them, the overall cultural oppression of each group is vastly different. Although it is not the case that the 'grunge kids' and 'gay kids' are each equally oppressed, it does highlight the potential for coalitions built upon shared experience rather than shared identity.

As stated, the first explicit mention of Rae as being trans occurs in the last quarter of the novella and is only mentioned twice more. The second time is in relation to their mother, they state, 'I never talked to my mother about being transgendered. There didn't seem to be a point after the way things went when I came out as gay' (Spoon, 2012, p.123). This summarises the recurring theme of identity violence throughout the text, wherein Rae is never able to discuss or fully embrace their identity because their identity is never acknowledged. As Rae notes:

I don't talk about politics with my family. I don't bring up my gender or sexuality either [...] I have never been confronted by any of them for my obvious leanings [...] I assume that most of my family is living inside a comfortable cocoon of denial (Spoon, 2012, p.127).

Whilst the violence here is not explicit, the suggestion that their family knows about but fails to acknowledge their identity is an act of identity violence that denies Rae cultural viability. Rae's family finds 'comfort' in erasing Rae's difference, something that also happens in society. This lack of social recognition has the effect of not only denying Rae their identity, but also of imposing feminine norms upon them which leads to their being judged for their lack of compliance. Rae's non-binary gender expression is therefore read as failure, rather than an authentic representation. This failure of recognition can also be assigned to a lack of culturally citable examples that

mean that Rae is only ever read through a cisnormative gaze. During their childhood this leads to a lack of self-confidence whereby that judgement of failure is internalised, and as an adult it leads to Rae separating themselves from their family.

From a young age Rae talks about the covert identity violence of knowing that they would never receive familial acceptance. Speaking of their younger sister, Rae states, '[s]he was the girl my parents wanted us both to be, and I was trying to lay low and get away with acting like a boy as much as I could' (Spoon, 2012, p.14-15). Describing it as 'laying low' implies deception, something previously discussed in chapter 2 regarding passing. In this case, the deception, rather than being a cissexist accusation of falsehood, is an act of self-protection. By remaining stealth, laying low, Rae is forced to self-police their identity in order to avoid violence. This is also seen regarding both their own and their sister's sexualities. Both identify as queer, 'my sister and I experienced the homophobic hatred together, sometimes evading carloads of boys together and running defence to make sure our family didn't find out' (Spoon, 2012, p.15). This scene illustrates the violence faced within the home and the local cis-heteronormative community; and indicates that it is something that would presumably increase should Rae's trans identity also become known. It additionally highlights the importance of community, without one another's support, Rae and their sister would have struggled even further, having no one to 'run defence'.

Rae's linking of their identity and the idea of deception continues throughout the text. They note that at the church-run girls' group they attended they 'would *covertly* choose boy colours' when crafting (Spoon, 2012, p.22, my emphasis) and that 'Voyageur Girls really *blew my cover*, though. In the absence of boys, I seemed even more boyish [...] I'm sure they giggled at the thought of me' (Spoon, 2012, p.23, my emphasis). The repetition of the idea of being undercover implies that Rae views their identity as something to be hidden, something which, should it be discovered, would lead to admonishment. The pressure Rae feels to conceal their identity, and their fear of being discovered leads to stringent self-policing, something that is inherently violent to the self. In the 2012 Trans Mental Health study, it was found that '70% of the participants stated that they were more satisfied with their lives since transition' (McNeil *et al.*, 2012, p.16). This acts to show that transition is a key aspect of improved

mental health, whereas being unable to transition and consequently self-policing one's identity leads to self-violence. Furthermore, '[f]or participants who had transitioned, this had led to changes in their self-harming. 63% felt that they harmed themselves more before they transitioned' (McNeil *et al.*, 2012, p.55). This is in keeping with the narrative representation of Rae's lived experience; they note, 'I couldn't feel anything anymore, and started cutting up my arms and legs, challenging my body to feel something' (Spoon, 2012, p.92); and their eating disorder, 'I couldn't run away [...] Instead I was trying hard to become nothing' (Spoon, 2012, p.93). These acts of pre-transition self-violence are concurrent with the findings of the above study and, in line with the figures, decrease once their gender is less policed, therefore acting to educate the reader of the potential for repression-motivated self-harm.

Rae tackles their self-harm and eating disorder when they move in with their grandmother, stating '[m]y grandmother accepted me far more than my parents ever did [...] Never critical of me for not being feminine enough' (Spoon, 2012, p.74). This increased acceptance and the lessening of social policing leads to an improvement in their mental health. However, this acceptance is still limited, 'I have never told her I am queer or trans. She has said a lot of homophobic things and I know she would not appreciate the revelation or bend her rules to accept me' (Spoon, 2012, p.74). As such, whilst Rae faces less identity violence at their grandmother's house, in that their identity is not actively denounced through the policing of their behaviour, they are still trapped by the violence of silence, of feeling unable to explicitly express their identity, instead remaining hidden and covert. Strangio has noted that:

Tragically few people go through the world without being surveilled and erased by the powerful and their power systems. And those who do – those who feel empowered and safe in powerful spaces – are disproportionately (if not exclusively) white, cis-, able-bodied, citizens with access to significant financial and social capital' (Strangio, 2015).

For Rae, all aspects of their life are surveilled in one way or another, whilst they are less attacked at their grandmother's than their parents' house, they are still unable to express their true gender identity. Similarly, whilst at Voyageur Girls they 'manag[e] to

fly under the radar', unlike at school where 'people would pick fights with me by calling me a tomboy' (Spoon, 2012, p.24), they still feel as though they stand out, '*I'm not one of them. Now they know*' (Spoon, 2012, p.25, italics in original). As such, they are constantly erased and a constant victim of identity violence that denies them cultural viability as a non-binary individual. As Halberstam has noted, 'tomboyism' is something that is 'generally tolerated' throughout childhood 'until it threatens [...] adolescent femininity' (Halberstam, 1998, p.268). Rae's early victimisation for being a 'tomboy' is suggestive of the increased violence they would face should they come out as non-binary, therefore discouraging them from doing so. As with Binnie's text, the legitimated fear of violence is all encompassing, affecting every choice that the character makes throughout the text. The policing of gender norms at school through the use of 'tomboy' as an insult and an excuse for violence is a formative experience for both victim and accuser. It enforces the belief that cultural norms are to be obeyed, and that those who fail to do so are individuals worthy of dehumanisation and repudiation.

Rae's desire to 'become nothing' as the motivation behind their eating disorder fits in with the identity violence they face as a result of being surveilled. In every aspect of their life, being visible as anything other than the cis-hetero archetype leads to negative repercussions. This also reflects the discussion of passing in chapter 2 in which being read as cisgender or living as stealth meant existing 'under the radar' and as such avoiding, at least to some extent, physical and identity violence. Any deviation from gendered norms is punished, and even as Rae self-polices their non-binary gender and sexuality, they face violence for even more generally accepted divergences, such as being considered a tomboy. This is due, in part, to the particularly strict nature of their family and religious local community. The lack of visibility of trans people in Rae's life is particularly emphasised by such a strict religious upbringing that leaves them without any knowledge of pop-culture in general, '[m]y Pentecostal parents had only ever let me listen to Christian music' (Spoon, 2012, p.33). This lack of cultural context leads to Rae feeling 'bad at being a girl' and 'deeply flawed' (Spoon, 2012, p.34, 35). As such, a lack of adequate trans representation, as discussed in the previous chapter, leads to a form of self-identity violence wherein Rae judges themselves by the gender norms of wider society and deems themselves lacking. This

creates a split between Rae's wanting to look as much like a boy as possible 'covert attempts at wearing as close to boys' clothing as I could get away with' (Spoon, 2012, p.32), and their resentment of people that judge their appearance as a failure of accurate gendered presentation. In one scene, 'one of the other girls made a comment about how I looked like a boy, and Nadia looked at me and laughed. I felt a darkness rise within me. *I'll show them*, I thought. *They won't be laughing next time*' (Spoon, 2012, p.51-52, emphasis in original). Rae later threatens the girls with a knife, an obvious phallic symbol. I posit that this reaction is based on two types of violence. The girls' mocking and laughter is an act of identity violence that denies Rae the viability of their gender presentation. Secondly, Rae's effort to live an authentic embodiment of their gender identity is undermined by the lack of cultural context and lexis available to them to fully understand it. As such, their embodiment, rather than actively reflecting their gender identity is a reaction against the wrongness they feel in femininity. Therefore, Rae is denied the mental health benefits of transition and is instead exposed only to a sense of failure for not conforming to the gender role expected of them by wider society, 'I couldn't bring myself to giggle with them [...] I couldn't manage to make friends with any of them. I felt like I was a dark cloud hovering in my bunk bed above them' (Spoon, 2012, p.56).

The depiction of gender roles in the novel are most explicitly illustrated through Rae's parents. Their mother, as mentioned, is held to the traditional role of wife during the majority of the novel, whilst Rae's father problematically epitomises masculinity. Diagnosed as a paranoid schizophrenic, Rae's father is regularly hospitalised throughout the text. He frequently abuses his family, something that their mother blames on his illness, however Rae states that '[h]e was cruel to all of us, even when he was on his pills', and that, having been released from hospital, 'he again tried to reassert his authority over our family' (Spoon, 2012, p.43). His authority is explicitly linked to his masculinity:

[H]e started going to meetings that were run by a fundamentalist Christian men's movement. He came home after one of their gatherings and called a family meeting. Looking at each one of us, he said, "Men need to take back

their rightful place as spiritual leaders in their homes [...] I am the man of this house and I need to take back my place at the head of it" (Spoon, 2012, p.42).

Through him, masculinity becomes linked with violence in the text, something that profoundly affects Rae's own identification. Regarding the move to their grandmother's house, Rae notes that 'I thought that all I had to do was get away from my father and then everything would be perfect. The truth, however, was that once he receded from my life, I continued to want to disappear because I felt like he was still close at hand' (Spoon, 2012, p.94). This marks the difference between the physical violence that Rae's father represents in person and the identity violence precipitated by his toxic masculinity. It creates a dichotomy whereby Rae craves masculinity for their own embodiment, but simultaneously fears it as both something worthy of punishment and something they inherently link with violence. In this way, their father personifies the link between identity violence and physical violence within the text.

Rae equates power over their body with masculinity, in the first instance by repeatedly trying to 'get away' with dressing like a boy and feeling 'awkward [...] like a cat in a T-shirt' when forced into feminine clothes. Secondly, this is achieved by trying to escape their father's masculinity through starvation and self-harm, something that only starts after their mother was forced to take him back '[m]y father came home from the hospital [...] That's when I stopped eating' (Spoon, 2012, p.91). This link is only severed after, having previously blocked it from their memory, Rae has the sudden and startling realisation that their father had abused them as a child:

I had grown up and around everything that had happened and now there was no way to separate myself from it, but I felt a resolve growing inside of me. I didn't want to turn into nothing now that I knew why I felt that way. I had refused to live in a house with my father and now I was willing to do anything to get my body back (Spoon, 2012, p.95).

In actively rejecting the toxic masculinity of their father Rae is able to begin to embody their own. It is only then that they cease wishing to disappear and desire to reclaim their body. This need for 'reclamation' shows how alienated they had become from

their body, it is not simply a case of wishing to regain control over it, but to connect to it at all. In freeing themselves from their association of masculinity with their father, Rae is able to begin to dictate their own masculinity and as such actively start to embody their own identity.

Whilst this text does not often explicitly engage with trans identity, it acts to emphasise the importance of trans visibility on the viability of trans lives and the subsequent impact of this on internal and external identity violence. The importance of representation on self-expression, acceptance and the lessening of self-policing may be seen through the impact that Ellen's coming out as gay on television has on Rae and her girlfriend's lives:

Now we knew that there were places we could run to where being queer was okay, like San Francisco or Los Angeles, Rena and I became bolder, We started to tell our friends that we were together [...] we started to do whatever we wanted even though we had to endure people hurling insults at us constantly (Spoon, 2012, p.82).

The marked difference in the way that Rae deals with insults in this scene compared to the one with the knife shows the effect of representation on embodiment. Whilst the representation here is about being gay, the effect is the same. In gaining cultural context of their identity, Rae gains an awareness of the cultural intelligibility and potential viability of that identity. Furthermore, this revelation gives Rae the insight they need to embrace the other aspects of their identity that had previously caused them distress. Rae cites the support of their girlfriend as a key aspect of their personal evolution, '[s]he was the first person that I ever felt safe to be myself around. It gave me hope that I could construct something secure and new for myself. It gave me reason to work out the ugliness inside me' (Spoon, 2012, p.83). The use of the words 'safe' and 'secure' highlight the danger that they had experienced prior to this. Furthermore, as previously mentioned, both Rae and their younger sister identified as gay from a young age and supported one another, the implication here is that the newfound safety Rae feels with Rena is based on their gender identity rather than their sexuality. The use of the word 'construct' here signals an anti-essentialist

viewpoint whilst the use of 'ugliness' harks back to previous comments about being 'flawed' for 'failing' to adequately embody femininity. As such, it can be inferred that this extract refers to Rae feeling safe to begin to actively embody their non-binary gender identity. Rae describes this process as 'wrestling' and 'worth the fight' (Spoon, 2012, p.83). Describing it as a fight highlights the violence of a society that does not accept such identities, making their embodiment a risk.

*As a bildungsroman, First Spring Grass Fire* shows the development of Rae's character as they come to discover and embrace their trans identity. Due to the nature of the genre and the setting of the novel, Rae's transness is something that largely exists in the background of the text and is something that active and knowledgeable readers become aware of long before Rae does. The violence within this text is largely based in denying Rae the viability of their gender expression and embodiment. Such identity violence is the result of the stringent policing of cis-heteropatriarchal ideals, something that denies Rae both their gender and sexual identity. The physical violence they face is also the result of the enforcement of normativity. Whilst Rae is explicitly targeted for their sexuality, the policing of their gender is usually more covert, this may be due to the fact that they had not yet come out as non-binary. This acts to further highlight the nature of identity violence, as it exposes the pre-emptive disposition of viability policing, acting to deny people their identity even before they openly express it through the use of negative portrayals, a lack of representation, and the regular enforcement of more generalised gendered behaviours.

#### **4.5: Coda**

Violence is the way in which all forms of trans oppression are upheld. Cultural and structural violence make the workings of trans oppression invisible as they naturalise the dehumanisation of trans people, and excuse the violence performed against them. This chapter has shown the different ways in which this can be enacted. Both physical (direct) and identity violence act to punish any deviation from cissexist norms, with identity violence working to deny the cultural viability of trans identities, failing to recognise them as legitimate and instead presenting them as false. This can then lead to acts of physical violence, something that is particularly witnessed in the trans panic legal defence. I have argued that the rigidity and enforcement of societal norms

regarding essentialist and binary gender lead directly to violence against trans people. A lack of accurate trans representation compounds this by providing false narratives that reinforce the stance that trans identities are a form of deceit. What I have highlighted in particular is the way in which physical and identity violence, or the threat thereof, leads to self-policing that acts as a form of personal identity violence wherein the trans person is unable to fully express their identity in fear of violent repercussions.

Both *Nevada* (Binnie, 2013) and *First Spring Grass Fire* (Spoon, 2012) feature characters who experience physical and identity violence. In Binnie's text, Maria is several years post-transition, whereas Rae in *First Spring Grass Fire* is not openly trans until late in the text. As a result of this, each text presents slightly different concerns, although both share a fundamental expectation and experience of violence in its many forms. As texts, these two novels showcase the covert, intrusive nature of identity violence and the threat of physical violence. In doing so, these novels make visible the impact of these issues on the lived experience of their characters.

In *Nevada*, Maria fears being outed or read as trans and engages in constant vigilance and self-policing to avoid the violence she experientially knows it can bring. She is careful to, where possible, only enter spaces in which she knows she is welcome and acts defensively in those spaces she is uncertain of. She also highlights the structural violence trans people face, noting how medical gatekeepers have little interest in diverse lived experience, only accepting those narratives that comply with the narrow norms of the single story. Rae, on the other hand, in *First Spring Grass Fire*, rarely notes structural violence, instead struggling with cultural violence from the highly religious community in which they live. They regularly cite their family's religious beliefs as preventing them from expressing their gender and sexuality, leading to the identity violence of stringent self-policing and the wish to disappear. Rae faces violence at school based on being read as a tomboy, which still ostensibly fits within binary gender, and as such fears expressing, or even truly realising, their non-binary identity until the resolution of other personal struggles allow them the emotional capacity to handle trans-specific oppression. Rae also highlights how a lack of representation negatively impacted their personal resilience as they were growing up,

leaving them uncertain of their identity. They describe how when they do experience trans representation it gives them a greater sense of self. What both of these texts do is emphasise how multiple forms of violence often coalesce to deny trans people viability and cause distress and self-policing. The impact of the constant fear of violence on each character's lived experience is significant and works to emphasise the way in which restrictive societal norms can be inherently violent.

## Conclusion

### 5: Summary

Throughout this thesis I have argued that the analysis of trans fiction is fundamentally important to the progression of trans theory and key to the political goal of improving trans viability in society. I have shown that it is possible to directly apply trans theory directly to literature, but also that literature is in the unique position to inform theory as it is the considered expression of lived experience in textual form. I believe that trans theory is deeply important and its use must be expanded into all aspects of society and academia as trans people are one of the most oppressed groups in contemporary society. Trans theory is uniquely positioned to consider the impact of theoretical concerns on subjective experience and the ways in which seemingly disparate communities may be linked through shared oppression. As such, understanding the way in which trans theory works has the potential to improve how *other* oppressed groups may be critically understood and politically united. This is because trans theory holds lived experience as an authoritative stance, allowing each individual's personal journey an equal level of importance. As such, I argue that trans theory is a narrative-based theory. It cannot exist separately from lived experience, and trans authored texts are the written equivalent of lived experience. I chose to use trans fiction in particular because it is an understudied genre, with auto/biography having received a great deal more attention. Therefore, what I have done in this thesis is analyse a previously under acknowledged collection of texts to show that trans theory may be directly applied to trans fiction in order to provide an analysis that highlights how trans fiction and trans lived experience reflect one another. However, the implications of this are far more wide-ranging. In showing that trans theory may be thematically applied to trans texts, this thesis provides the basis for a framework of trans literary analysis that may be applied to all texts, (something that will be further discussed in the future recommendations section of this chapter).

Throughout this thesis it has been my aim to emphasise the multifaceted oppression that trans people face in society. I have worked to achieve this by providing a nuanced analysis of various trans fiction texts, using the values of trans theory to highlight the

ways in which the norms of their society affect the trans protagonists and how this impacts their lives. It was also my hope that in focussing on trans fiction, I could play a small role in promoting trans visibility and representation within academia and, in doing so, highlight the role that trans fiction can play within society.

I have explored how issues of essentialism, passing, representation and violence are considered within trans theory, but additionally how they are subjectively experienced. As such, my thesis has included blog and social media posts in order to gather a wide range of trans perspectives less encumbered by the issues of cultural capital and access to formal publishing. In order to provide my literary analysis I first constructed a definition of the genre of trans fiction, describing it as that which is written by, for, and about trans people. These texts reflect lived experience in literature. This definition also ensured that I did not judge a text solely on the identity of the author, whilst still allowing that lived experience is a crucial aspect. Furthermore, in using books that focussed specifically on the characters' experiences of existing as trans, I was able to draw explicit links between trans theory and the literary texts.

### **5.1: Essentialism**

The biologically essentialist linking of sex and gender is the foundation of the majority of trans oppression. Because of this, queer and trans theoretical stances have typically been associated with anti-essentialism or social-constructivism. What I propose instead is that, when considering trans theory, there are cisnormative and trans contexts for essentialist and anti-essentialist understandings of both sex and gender. Like most trans theorists (See Nataf, 1996; Halberstam, 1998; Prosser, 1998; Namaste, 2000; Enke, 2012; Nagoshi, Nagoshi and Brzuzy, 2014), I have engaged with the work of Judith Butler at several points throughout this thesis, in this case in order to consider her supposition that both sex and gender are social constructs and to discuss the different ways in which trans identities may engage with this. Considering *both* as social constructs has the potential to deny the desire for gendered embodiment, or, to showcase the equality of all genders by declaring that they are *all* constructed. In redefining essentialist and anti-essentialist concepts in the light of trans theory I have been able to highlight the dynamic and sometimes contradictory ways that trans

theory, in being based on lived experience and self-definition, can be used to approach a single topic. Through my analysis of *Tiny Pieces of Skull* (Kaveney, 2015) and *Refuse* (DeLine, 2009), I have highlighted how essentialist links between sex and gender can be used in a cissexist fashion in order to deny the validity of a trans person's identity, or in a trans context in order to establish gender identity as resistant to the pressures of cultural norms and socialisation. These texts also began to establish the threat of violence that trans people face based on the way society perceives the legitimacy of their gender, as when Annabelle faces identity violence from her friend Magda who describes her transition and identity as 'unnatural' (Kaveney, 2015, p.10).

## **5.2: Passing**

In my discussion of passing I explicitly described the link between the enforcement of cissexist essentialist beliefs and the impact they have on trans lived experience. I showed how essentialist and anti-essentialist beliefs are read onto trans bodies through their ability/desire to pass. Passing, in the context of this thesis, means being read as cisgender, and therefore being read as embodying biologically essentialist norms. In a trans context this can be seen as either a mechanism of safety, or as highly problematic in that it reinforces binary norms and ideas that being (seen as) trans is negative. I discuss the issue of hierarchies within the trans community, where passing may be viewed as the ultimate symbol of success or as 'complicit with normative gendering' (Roan, 2002, p.501) and therefore less politically worthy. What trans theory works towards is the removal of stigma against trans people, making the decision or ability to pass entirely subjective and devoid of political or cultural implications. However, this is not yet the case, which is also made explicitly clear in *Stone Butch Blues* (Feinberg, 1993) and *Transition to Murder* (James, 2012) in which both protagonists at some point during their novel struggle to pass and as a result face both identity and physical violence. Similarly, each struggles with the impact that passing, or failing to do so, has on their own sense of identity and embodiment.

## **5.3: Representation and Community**

In this chapter, I proposed a key modification of the conception of Butler's terms 'cultural intelligibility' and 'cultural viability', both of which she defines as relating to how people are made 'recognisably human' in society (Butler, 2004, p.225). However, I

contend that whilst intelligibility may be reliant on 'recognisable' engagement with societal expectations, viability is far more subjective. I argued that cultural viability should instead be defined as the subjective experience of an individual's life as the result of such norms being placed upon it. It is through this reframing that I was able to articulate the need for increased diversity and representation of trans people, as '[w]e come to know ourselves and to be *known by others* through the images and stories of popular culture' (Walters, 2003, p.13, my emphasis). Improved representations of trans lives leads to improved cultural intelligibility, which, when paired with diverse and positive trans representation, leads to improved viability. Representation also has an impact on the building of communities, in that it enables people to understand that they are not 'the only one in the world' (Formby, 2017, p.160) and as such seek others for support. As is witnessed in both novels analysed in chapter 3, *Otros Valles* (Berrout, n.d.) and *Roving Pack* (Lowrey, 2012), and indeed in many of the novels featured in this thesis, community support is crucially important both to the lived experience and mental health of each of the trans characters. I argued that trans community, representation and visibility are fundamentally connected and all three can have an impact on issues of cultural viability.

#### **5.4: Violence**

In this chapter I identified a form of violence that directly related to trans experience, which I describe as 'identity violence'. I defined this as referring to how the lack of societal acknowledgement of trans identities and the subsequent dehumanisation of trans people lead directly to a lack of cultural viability. In order to achieve this, I used Galtung's work (1969, 1990) on distinctions between types of violence such as physical, psychological, structural and cultural to define the specific way in which cultural, structural and psychological forms of violence come together to deny the validity of particular identities that deviate from culturally legitimated norms. I also describe self-policing as a key aspect of identity violence, in that it leads to adjustments of gender presentation that can have a negative impact on a trans person's mental health. I argue that self-policing is often the result of the experience or expectation of physical violence or identity violence, which leads to a self-perpetuating cycle. I use the trans panic defence to describe how the enforcement of cissexist cultural norms leads to the acceptance of physical violence against trans

people and how this is inherently linked to my definition of identity violence. As may be seen with the protagonists in both *Nevada* (Binnie, 2013) and *First Spring Grass Fire* (Spoon, 2012) identity violence and the experience or threat of physical violence come together to create a level of self-policing whether that is regarding gender expression or restricting oneself to particular locations known to be safe.

## **5.5: Limitations and Future Recommendations**

The purview of this thesis has been limited to trans fiction. However, alongside this specific focus, I also limited my selection of texts to those that were published post-1990 in the UK and USA. This decision meant that I was able to discuss those texts that were written after the establishment of trans theory (Stone, 1991; Bornstein, 1994; Stryker, 1994), and those that share a level of cultural similarity. How trans identities are understood and experienced in other countries and at different times may differ vastly and as such those contexts require specific analyses of their own. Therefore, another research avenue would be to track the extent to which trans literary themes and tropes have evolved over time and whether this is in alignment with the development of trans theory and trans rights. Similarly, a comparative analysis of an international selection of texts could provide an examination of the way in which different cultural contexts and norms impact upon trans lived experiences in fiction.

The ability to position trans theory and fiction in a mutually informative relationship, as evidenced by my analysis, may also be effectively applied to other genres and types of fiction, particularly those that include issues of gender identity and embodiment. One way in which to further the work of this thesis would be to carry out an analysis of cis authored texts using trans theory as demonstrated in the analysis in this thesis. It would then be possible to consider how trans characters are presented differently by different authors and the reasons behind this. This could lead to a more substantial discussion of the impact of author identity and lived experience upon the characterisation of subjugated identities.

Finally, in line with my work in chapter 3 on the importance of visibility and representation and how they can impact trans lived experience, I propose that collecting reader response data from trans people reading trans fiction would be a

valuable addition to the fields of trans theory and literary studies. This would produce information on how such readers interpret their identity as represented in texts, and if and how this differs depending on authorship. This would clarify the impact of trans fiction as a genre. Furthermore, gaining multiple perspectives on how trans identities and experiences have been represented in texts would continue to develop the interpretive potential of the theory's application to literature.

## 5.6: Final Conclusions

My original contribution to knowledge within this thesis is the reworking of trans theory in order to provide a thematic analysis of the understudied genre of trans fiction. In doing so, I have unpacked the nuances of trans theory, particularly those influenced by lived experience, and have therefore redefined the potential of trans theory. Furthermore, I have presented new definitions of essentialist and anti-essentialist thought regarding trans identities and have established a new classification of violence that applies directly to trans identities.

In the seven years that I have been researching trans narratives during my MA and PhD, there has been a great deal of positive change regarding the social standing of trans people. In 2012 it was confirmed that *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-V) would change the diagnosis of 'gender identity disorder' to 'gender dysphoria' (Heffernan, 2012). This went some way toward lessening the medicalisation of trans identities, as they ceased to be described as 'disorders'. It instead acknowledged the more subjective experience of living with a dissonance between assigned sex and gender identity. In 2014 Laverne Cox became the first trans person to be on the cover of *TIME* magazine, something that was heralded as 'The Transgender Tipping Point' (Steinmetz, 2014), and almost exactly a year later, Caitlyn Jenner was featured on the cover of *Vanity Fair* (Bissinger, 2015). However, alongside this, there has also been a significant amount of backlash, as witnessed by increases in transphobic violence (see Trans Respect, 2017; Bachmann and Gooch, 2017), something which emphasises the need for further social change and improved cultural and structural protection for trans people in society.

Reading trans fiction has given me a more well-rounded awareness of the various subjective experiences of being trans, of the daily struggles and considerations that must be made; of the lived realities of expecting and experiencing violence, even in those spaces that ought to be safe; of the impact of having a community and friends that understand what you are going through. It has made me reconsider how I engage with my own identity and had led me to seek out a community of my own. But fundamentally, it has reinforced my belief in the potentially transformative nature of literature. Mira, in Jamie Berrout's *Otros Valles*, states '[a]nd, reading the next chapter in Janet Mock's book, I wake again' (n.d., p.107). It is my hope that this thesis, and these books can help to wake others too.

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