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Narrating (In) Transformation: Contextual Narratology, Gender, and
The Dialogic Interplay Between
Narrative Form and Narrated Content

Eftihia Saxoni



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Abstract

This doctoral thesis explores the dialogic relationship between narrative form and narrated content through the lens of contextual narratology, focusing on gender-conscious novels that emphasise identities in transition. Specifically, my research approaches narrative form as a system of interconnected, interdependent and mutually illuminating relations (both structural and thematic), the detailed study of which can reveal gender- and queer-related significations when examined through a contextual narratological lens.

Challenging the view of formalism as either rigidly tied to structural foundations that prioritise form over content—as is often the case in classical narratology—or as restrictive or irrelevant to gender- and queer-related meanings—a stance commonly associated with gender and queer studies—I propose an alternative conception of formalism. I frame it as a methodological approach that occupies a middle ground, namely, a study of narrative form in dynamic interaction with narrated content, employing the analytical tools of narratology while also engaging with theoretical concepts from gender and queer theory.

To foreground this understanding of narrative form, I turn to the principle of transformation—a concept rooted in Structuralism but still underexplored in terms of its potential for narrative analysis and processing. By tracing its development in narratology and its more recent engagement within queer narrative theory, I argue that transformation serves as a crucial link between narrative form and narrated content, as it encapsulates the dynamic interplay between a narrative's structural shifts and the thematic changes it conveys.

Moreover, a central aim of this research is to examine the potential role of gender as a productive element in narrative processing. I respond affirmatively to the question—first raised in the 1980s and 1990s but still largely unanswered—of whether gender can productively inform narrative analysis. To this end, I explore gender through its intratextual, formal function: not simply as a contextual factor, but as it operates in relation to structural narrative elements such as temporality, perspective, focalisation, narrative space, characterisation, and metafiction. In doing so, I underscore the importance of contextual narratology—particularly feminist, rhetorical, and queer approaches—in uncovering nuanced gendered and queer significations. Finally, I demonstrate the limitations of classical narratology in addressing such narratives, highlighting the need for more expansive and critically engaged narratological frameworks.

Lay Summary

This thesis examines the relationship between narrative form and narrated content across six novels of modern and contemporary literature from a contextual narratological standpoint. Just as every building is constructed on its own foundations, every narrative—every text—is “built” on its own narrative foundations, comprised of structural narrative elements. Narratology is the discipline that studies these foundations. In my research, I focus on the structural elements of temporality, perspective, focalisation, narrative space, characterisation and metafiction, with an emphasis on their fluctuating functions across different narratives that depict protagonists undergoing transformation. I argue that the transformation on a structural level is reflected in the thematic transformation and vice versa, creating an interdependent and interilluminating relationship between form and content.

Additionally, I treat gender as the conduit for this relationship, demonstrating how it can serve as an effective signifier of meaning when examined in dialogue with narrative foundations. By doing so, I position my research within contemporary narratological discussions that advocate for an expansive yet structurally grounded approach to texts, particularly in relation to gender and other contextual elements. Ultimately, my goal is to highlight the enduring relevance of narratology and its expansive capabilities, while also underscoring the significance of form as a carrier of content, and content as a carrier of form by means of gender.

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Theorising Transformation	10
Towards a Postclassical Narratology: A Narratological Turn to the Consideration of Narrative Form in Context	23
Current Academic Discussions	35
Limitations	39

Segment One: Transformation in Metamorphosis

Chapter One

The Constancy of Incessant Change: Panoramic Temporality in *Orlando: A Biography* (1928) by Virginia Woolf

Introduction	42
Temporal Strangeness: Time on the Clock and Time in the Mind	48
The Body as Time and Time as Body	59
Synchronic and Diachronic Approaches to Temporality	67
Identity as a Continuum	75
Conclusions	85

Chapter Two

“You are she. She is you.”: Identity Fragmentation through Perspective in *The Fifth Season* by N.K. Jemisin (2015)

Introduction	88
Metamorphosis and Genre	93
Neo-Slave Narrative Themes	101
Unveiling the Second-Person Mode: Identity Fragmentation	109
Black Motherhood	116
Terraforming	122
Conclusions	132

Segment Two: Transformation in Dis-/Re-Location

Chapter Three

Genetic and Narrative Sources: Hybrid Focalisation in *Middlesex* (2002) by Jeffrey Eugenides

Introduction	134
Focalisation as Consciousness	138
Focalisation as Restriction of Information	149
Parallel Temporalities: Gendered and Personal Timelines	160

The Rhetoric of Genetics	169
Conclusions.....	174
Chapter Four	
“Escalators are for them”: Thematising Narrative Space in <i>Disoriental</i> (2018) by Négar Djavadi	
Introduction.....	176
Theorising Space.....	180
Accessibility and Mobility: The Fertility Clinic as Heterotopia	184
The Political Boundaries of Privacy: Home as a Public Space	198
Spatialising Sexuality	204
Dis-/Re-Location: Towards a Disoriental Space.....	208
Conclusions.....	215
Segment Three: Transformation in Transgender Identity	
Chapter Five	
In-Between Genres/Genders: Characterising the Body of <i>Stone Butch Blues: A Novel</i> (1993) by Leslie Feinberg	
Introduction.....	217
The (Trans) Self in Life-Writing	221
The Body as a Component of Characterisation	226
Liminality	232
The Authenticity Hypothesis	240
Escaping the Transsexual Plot	249
Conclusions.....	253
Chapter Six	
Generative Affinities: Metafiction and Transgender Identity in <i>Confessions of the Fox</i> (2018) by Jordy Rosenberg	
Introduction.....	255
Towards an Alternative Historicity	259
Text as Body and Body as Text	276
Metafiction and Transness	284
Conclusions.....	287
Conclusions	289
Bibliography.....	296

Introduction

[I]n narration, sequences are more than episodic accounts (that again would amount to nothing more than description). Sequences are arranged in patterns signifying that some state of mind or some state of affairs undergoes some sort of change. This is the principle of *transformation*, and it is rooted in our perception of unities. Comprehension of unities enables us –among other things– to define beginnings and endings. The notions of time and succession in themselves do not. (Schärfe 2; italics in original)

[I]t is not true that the only relationship between the units is one of *succession*; we can say that the relationship of the units must also be one of *transformation*. Here we have the two principles of narrative. (Todorov, “The 2 Principles of Narrative” 39; italics in original)

If in the 1980s and 1990s I was urging narrative studies to be queerer and more feminist, I’m now urging feminist and queer studies –and even narrative studies– to be more narratological. While feminism and narratology have made a fruitful marriage that produced contextual narratology as its sturdiest offspring, the benefits of narratology remain undertapped. Tapping those benefits, however, may require some reform in narratological theories and practices, not least a shift to inductive and intersectional approaches and a hard interrogation of terms and priorities. (Lanser, “Toward (a Queerer and) More (Feminist) Narratology” 24)

Contributing to the theoretical discussions¹ on an expansive, contextual narratology that extends beyond its structuralist foundation, my doctoral thesis interrogates the interplay between narrative form and narrated content, namely, between *narrating* (narrative discourse) and *narrated* (story) with an emphasis on gender as a potentially productive parameter to narrative analysis and processing. It specifically argues for the importance of contextual narratology—particularly feminist, rhetorical and queer approaches—in exploring gender—a contextual element—and in examining its intratextual functions in relation to the structural elements of the narrative.

In doing so, I propose a perspective on narrative form that diverges from the traditionally structuralist vision of classical narratology that has historically prioritised the examination of narrative structures over their relationship to the narrated story. I am, undoubtedly, indebted to classical narratology and the great theorists and teachers who have paved the way for my (and others') contemporary approach to formalism, as they have profoundly shaped my perspective on narrative analysis. Without their invaluable contributions, this research would not have been possible. At the same time, I cannot be indifferent to the theoretical and methodological limitations of classical narratology, as well as its often rigid views on how formalism "should" be. As a result, I aim to showcase the pursuit of a narratological analysis that

¹ The official narrative turn towards a more expansive narratology is signified by David Herman's seminal work *Narratologies: New Perspectives on Narrative Analysis*. However, many narratologists advocated for such a need earlier; see, for instance, Susan Lanser's "Toward a Feminist Narratology"; Lawrence Kramer's "Musical Narratology: A Theoretical Outline"; Marie-Laure Ryan's *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence, and Narrative Theory*; Ann Fehn et al.'s *Neverending Stories: Towards a Critical Narratology*; Monika Fludernik's "Towards a 'Natural' Narratology".

incorporates gender-conscious significations and contextually informed frameworks, while staying true to its structuralist roots.

In order to examine gender through a formalist lens and, conversely, narrative form through a gender-conscious lens, my work is also influenced by gender studies and queer narrative theory. However, similar to classical narratology, formalism has equally been a debated topic for gender studies and queer narrative theory, as the detailed study of form is often seen as merely a constraint (or even irrelevant) to queer- and gender-related meanings. While both classical narratology and gender studies have shaped narrative theory, which I fully acknowledge, not seeking to diminish their distinct, invaluable contributions, they have also traditionally framed the discourse on formalism in the two respective ways described above.

Instead, I conceptualise narrative form as something in between, highlighting the potential intersections between classical narratology and gender studies, regardless of their distinct methodologies and areas of focus. Specifically, I view narrative form as a system of interconnected, mutually illuminating relations (both structural and thematic), the detailed study of which can reveal gender- and queer-related significations when examined through a contextual narratological lens. To substantiate this, I focus on narratives that foreground gender through diverse lenses—such as motherhood, transness, and sexuality—and that portray identities in transition, in transformation.

As the title of my thesis suggests, I approach the notion of narrating dually: as a verb (“Narrating Transformation”), designating the act of telling a story about transformation, and as a noun (“Narrating in Transformation”), highlighting the

transformative processes that a narrative's structural elements undergo in the construction of said story. Both "narrating" and "transformation" are inherently descriptive of an act in progress; the former describes "the producing narrative action" (Genette 27), and the latter designates the process of change from one form to another. In the context of my thesis, this element is vital as it underlines the constitutive function of narrative structures, as they shape and mould one another to construct a storyline. Therefore, my research hypothesis is that the common ground between form and content—the key factor enabling their dialogue—is the notion of transformation, specifically in a dual sense: structural and thematic.

But why transformation? Why not focus on another shared element, such as temporality? There are several reasons for this, which I will address in the next section of this introduction. However, the primary reason is that I propose transformation not merely as a structural or thematic concern, but as a critical tool for narratological inquiry—one that serves not only as a bridge between narrative form and narrated story but also as a methodological framework. Unlike other elements present in both a text's structure and its content, such as temporality, transformation also offers a methodology. It enables us to read form not simply as a sequence of episodes or events but as an ongoing, dynamic process of shaping and reshaping. In this regard, my research aims to demonstrate that a narrative's structural elements (such as temporality, perspective, focalisation, narrative space, characterisation and metafiction) do not merely follow one another in a linear sequence; rather, they merge, influence and *transition into* one another to illuminate shifting thematic significations. Their relationship is not one of mere succession but of transition—of transformation.

To explore this relationship, the key questions I aim to address are: 1) How are thematic transformations within a story manifested narratively, or, in other words, how are they reflected in the narrative's structural elements? And, conversely, 2) How do the structural elements of a narrative (e.g. temporality, perspective, focalisation, space, characterisation, and metafiction) change in both form and function (namely, transform) as the exploration of the protagonists' identities unfolds? Through this analysis, two dialogic types of transformation will emerge: a narratological one (located in the *narrating/narrative* discourse) and a thematic one (located in the *narrated/story*). By approaching transformation both structurally and thematically, I demonstrate the various ways in which the synthetic and interdependent relationship between form and content is realised across three thematic categories (with regard to metamorphosis, dis-/re-location, and transgender identity) and six different novels of modern and contemporary literature, with gender serving as the conduit for this relationship.

The main body of my thesis consists of three primary segments, each containing two chapters, which explore different thematic dimensions of transformation. Within each segment, I undertake an individual analysis and interpretation of two novels, with a focus on a core concept of narrative theory for each novel. In the first segment, I approach transformation as metamorphosis and examine *Orlando: A Biography* (1928) by Virginia Woolf and *The Fifth Season* (2015) by N.K. Jemisin. In chapter one, I argue for the conceptualisation of time across a continuum as the narrative manifestation of the panoramic perception of the protagonist's identity in *Orlando*. I explore the ways that temporality is employed in the novel, taking both sequential (chronology) and non-sequential forms (memory,

writing and reading literature), safeguarding the individual and collective identity of Orlando and England's (hi)story respectively. By positioning fluidity at the core of the process of "taking shape" (Fawaz 54), I discuss that metamorphosis is portrayed as a malleable yet constant process within the novel—achieved through the temporal structuring of the narrative discourse. In this context, I contend that Orlando's body undergoes a sexed transformation while retaining a genderless identity throughout the narrative, embodying both gender and time in a panoramic rather than binary and/or linear manner.

In chapter two, I investigate how the manipulation of perspective in *The Fifth Season* serves as a conduit for conveying the effects of trauma, the enduring impact of slavery and the portrayal of Black motherhood. Specifically, I argue that the use of second-person narration facilitates a reconfiguration of Black identity, reconciling pre- and post-slavery subjectivity while challenging the authority of the narratee/reader in traditional slave and neo-slave narratives. Finally, through the lens of environmental transformation, I discuss how the employment of the second-person narrative serves as the narratological embodiment of the Other while simultaneously depicting the act of Othering.

In the second segment of my thesis, I examine the notion of transformation with regard to dis-/re-location, through an analysis of *Middlesex* (2002) by Jeffrey Eugenides and *Disoriental* (2018) by Négar Djavadi. In chapter three, I argue that the protagonist's intersexuality in *Middlesex* is rendered a metaphorical site of relocation of different identities and genetic (hi)stories across time, which is textually realised through a hybrid focalised narrative. Most importantly, I contend that the very

narrative impossibility that focalisation stages—by making the impossible narratively possible via zero focalisation—ultimately operates at the expense of the intersex subject, as it “displac[es] [its intelligibility] outside the realm of possible” (Amato 182). In chapter four, I examine the narrative concept of space and its implications for the identity formation of the exiled, disoriented individual in *Disoriental*. I examine how narrative space is both theorised and thematised as a site—both geographical and linguistic—of multiple transitions, tensions, and intersections, revealed through the characters’ positionality, or their lack thereof, within particular spaces. Finally, I contend that the invasion of the private sphere of the home—transforming the domestic space into a political, public arena—parallels the violent politicisation of the migrant individual, positioning them as a site of non-privacy and public accessibility.

In the third and final segment of the main body of my thesis, I attend to the notion of transformation with respect to transgender identity, where my analysis focuses on *Stone Butch Blues: A Novel* (1993) by Leslie Feinberg and *Confessions of the Fox* (2018) by Jordy Rosenberg. In chapter five, I look at the notion of characterisation in *Stone Butch Blues*, through its dual meaning; a) as the construction of a fictional character and b) as the act of *charactirisein* (χαρακτηρίζειν), namely, of describing the distinctive nature or features of someone or something. Through the lens of corporeal narratology, I examine how the body of the protagonist engenders the novel's characterisation, foregrounding the connection between gender and genre, namely, corporeal and discursive embodiment. In doing so, I raise and attempt to respond to the question of authenticity in relation to the discursive body: what kind of pressure does the trans, gender-non-conforming body put on the narrative to prove authenticity? Finally, in chapter six, I argue for the constitutive function of metafiction

for trans identity in *Confessions of the Fox*. I examine the distinctive elements within Rosenberg's metafiction that align it with transgender themes and analyse the ways that these themes are manifested narratively. Lastly, I discuss the intrinsic connection between metafictionality and transness, examining their mutual implications in terms of ontological and rhetorical autonomy, as well as their influence on perception and reception.

The selection of these six novels is based on a few factors. First, each novel presents distinct gendered experiences, offering a diverse and nuanced exploration of gender. This variety allows for a comprehensive examination of how gender manifests and is represented across different narratives, ensuring that a broad spectrum of gendered stories is considered. There is also a methodological aspect to this choice. Gender represents one of the most expansive categories of contextual elements² that could significantly enhance narrative analysis, and to demonstrate the potential productivity of such a contextual element adequately, it is essential to account for its multiple facets, thereby fully capturing the possibilities of its consideration.

In the context of my thesis, I will be focusing on motherhood (*The Fifth Season*, *Disoriental*), sexuality (*Disoriental*, *Stone Butch Blues*) and transgender identity (*Middlesex*, *Stone Butch Blues*, *Orlando*, *Confessions of the Fox*), as a departure point for an adequately well-rounded analysis of gender as an element of narrative processing. My approach to gender is, of course, not exhaustive or dogmatic, but suggestive, striving to capture a part of the breadth of such an element of context. The

² In "Narratology, Narratological Criticism, and Gender", Gerald Prince argues that the narrating subject can be potentially influenced by several contextual elements, such as gender, race, class, age, ethnicity, height, and weight (162).

thematic overlapping between the primary texts, as depicted above, is a noteworthy aspect, as it showcases the difficulty in distinguishing facets of gender that are so closely associated.

Moreover, the texts are chosen according to their negotiation of the theme of transformation. *Orlando: A Biography*, which was published at the height of Modernism, constitutes one of the most famous transformation stories of the Western canon and one of the most significant novels on gender, radicalising the notion of sexual and gender fluidity. *The Fifth Season*, though a much more recent publication, stands as one of the most highly-praised contemporary science fiction novels, addressing the concept of transformation through the intertwined themes of a slave narrative and ecological perspectives. *Middlesex* has undoubtedly been a controversial work, foregrounding intersex identity while also delving into the history of the Greek diaspora in the 20th century. It notably references the globally recognised event of the Burning of Smyrna in 1922 and the subsequent refugee crisis that ensued.

On the other hand, *Disoriental* tells a story based on the Iranian Revolution of 1978-1979, rendering immigration as its main theme, where transformation is approached through the lens of dis-/re-location for the exile individual. Following that, *Stone Butch Blues: A Novel* is considered one of the most influential novels on gender studies written by one of the most important figures of transgender activism. *Confessions of the Fox* attends to the concept of transformation by fictionalising Jack Sheppard's story and adding a postmodern twist to the infamous thief of eighteenth-century England.

In addition to their distinctive portrayal of identities in transit, these six novels were also chosen because they have not been directly examined through the lens of contextual narratology in relation to gender, making their exploration essential to my study. Particularly, *Disoriental*, *The Fifth Season*, and *Confessions of the Fox*—partly due to being the most recently published among the group—have yet to receive the narratological attention they require, especially in terms of contextual narratology. While these novels have been discussed to some extent in relation to narrative form and gender, their thematic intersections and structural complexities call for a more expansive narratological approach. By integrating structuralist methodology with a gender- and queer-conscious perspective, this study seeks to highlight the dynamic interplay between form and content, bringing their interconnections into sharper focus.

Theorising Transformation

Returning to the question of why focus on transformation, the second reason this concept is crucial to my discussion of narrative form from the standpoint of contextual narratology is that transformation is not only relevant to narrative, but inherent to it. Although one rarely associates the term transformation with narrative theory or poetics, this concept has indeed been employed within narratology to address the complexity and synthesis of literary texts. In his 1977 book, *Poetics of Prose*, Tzvetan Todorov wrote a chapter entitled “Narrative Transformations”, which he defined as “a narrative category [...] whose status is precisely intermediary” (219). He bases his research on the necessity of bridging the gap between the general, all-encompassing perspective on narrative form—conceptualised by Propp in his

formulation of the rigid narrative functions of Russian fairytales—and the specific details that strip narrative form of its universality.

Unlike Propp, who previously used the term “transformation” to refer to the semantic, rather than the syntactic or structural, aspects of narratives, Todorov reiterates his structural approach to narrative, linking the micro-structure of a sentence to the macro-structure of the text as a whole and making “transformation” a key syntactical feature of narrative grammar. To illustrate the transformative nature of language, and by extension narrative, he examines predicates: the components of sentences that include a verb alongside any additional descriptors, which provide information, or “produce a specification”, about the subject of the sentence (Todorov, “Narrative Transformations” 228). Todorov concentrates on completive verbs and investigates the type of relationship that arises depending on the predicate employed. For instance, in the sentence “X must commit a crime”, he identifies a “transformation of mode” due to the modal verb’s indication that the described action is essential—it is indeed a transformation because the modal verb alters the verbal property of prohibition (“commit a crime”) into a necessity (“must”) (“Narrative Transformations” 226).

But how does one get from the micro-structure of a sentence to the macro-structure of whole texts? Based on the “quantitative or qualitative predominance of one or another type of transformations” (“Narrative Transformations” 231), Todorov argues that we can produce an analysis that accounts for the complexity of literary texts, by diving deep into their very lexical structure. It could be claimed, for example, that the novels of Henry James are full of “transformations of knowledge”, dominating

“the linear movement of the narrative”, or that in *The Quest of the Holy Grail* the two types of narrative transformations that are primarily used (such as the transformations of supposition) dictate that “all events which occur are announced in advance” and that “once they have occurred they receive a new interpretation, in a particular symbolic code” (Todorov, “Narrative Transformations” 231). As Todorov acknowledges, such an approach to narrative analysis sheds light on only one dimension of the many dimensions that make up a potential typology of analyses. And yet, what he manages to achieve with this methodology is to deduce the grammatical transformations of narrative to structural transformations and, consequently, to story-related significations, bringing together form and content, as described here:

The simple relation of successive facts does not constitute a narrative: these facts must be organized, which is to say, ultimately, that they must have elements in common. But if all the elements are in common, there is no longer a narrative, for there is no longer anything to recount. Now, transformation represents precisely a synthesis of differences and resemblance, it links two facts without their being able to be identified. Rather than a ‘two-sided unit’, it is an operation in two different directions: [...] it permits discourse to acquire a meaning without the meaning becoming pure information; in a word, it makes narrative possible and yields us its very definition. (“Narrative Transformations” 233)

Todorov himself acknowledges that this methodology is somewhat vague and generic, yet he points out its usefulness in providing a framework for studying all narratives (“Narrative Transformations” 233). In other words, it does not offer a

comprehensive formula for analysing all narratives as if they were a single narrative form. Instead, it suggests that the consideration of narrative form—which consists of various internal structural (trans)formations—is essential for analysing the semantics of any given narrative. Todorov's understanding of transformation reflects how narratology views it—as a structural principle. In this context, form is seen as discourse, inherently structural and intradiegetic, comprising both quantitative and qualitative characteristics. However, recent theorists from queer narrative studies have reconceptualised the notion of transformation, exploring it beyond the confines of pure structuralism, which brings me to the third reason for examining the dialogic relationship between form and content through the lens of transformation.

In my research, I aim to demonstrate not only the importance of narratological approaches in gender-conscious interpretations but also the narrative principle of transformation as a powerful analytical tool, particularly in relation to queer narratives; transformation not only reveals the relationships between narrative structures, as Todorov suggests, but can also illuminate the diverse expressions of queerness. By exploring how the elements that constitute form merge and evolve into one another—creating connections not just of succession but of transition, of transformation—we can also examine how queerness itself shifts and takes new shapes throughout a narrative of change. In other words, the reconceptualisation of transformation by contemporary queer narrative theorists underscores the need for an approach to form that remains grounded in structuralism while also recognising and leveraging the ways in which form can illuminate content—particularly when engaging with queer identities and subjectivities—and how content, in turn, can shed light on the teleology of form. In the paragraphs that follow, I discuss how

transformation has been theorised by queer narrative theorists whose work's trajectory aligns with my own. At the same time, I demonstrate how our methodologies and research scope differ, as I position my research within contemporary academic discussions and advocate for a contextual and feminist narratological perspective on form and transformation.

To begin with, Ramzi Fawaz in his work *Queer Forms* (2022) theorises transformation as emerging from “the presence of multitudinous queer forms [...] [which] provide formerly unimaginable possibilities for what we could be or become, but always in our own version” (364). For Fawaz, transformation signifies the capacity to take shape and emphasises the importance of daring to imagine a “proliferation of forms”. Arguing against the notion that gender and sexual diversity equals fluidity and, therefore, formlessness, Fawaz theorises the “queer potential of cultural forms” as a spectrum of shapes and structures that can materialise a plethora of identities and experiences (7). In posing the question of “*what forms gender and sexual rebellion take*” (7), Fawaz negates the general thesis of much contemporary theory that the attempt to give queerness a shape is suffocating, constraining and, ultimately, unimaginable. And it is exactly against this unimaginability that Fawaz positions his *Queer Forms* and studies a variety of aesthetic structures to showcase how these bring out the new possibilities of gender and sexuality. Fawaz resists equating queerness with the imperative of fluidity as the only nuance to understanding queerness, and argues for the necessity of queer forms as “enabling structures” that safeguard the “practice of continually coming into concrete being” (11).

This is where the notion of transformation comes into play; it describes the different ways that individuals change in the course of their life, “how [they] meaningfully mold and remold their sense of self over time” (Fawaz 11). It also illustrates how queer forms themselves change, depending on the different ways that they resonate with different individuals, which results in the forms’ constant re-signification; a signification similar to the one individuals experience with regard to their identities. Lastly, the concept of changing shape, of transforming, describes how both queer and non-queer people can change the various forms that their conception of gender and sexuality (along with kinship, desire and intimacy) take in their minds, resulting in a both expansive and expanded theorisation of the term. This representation in culture across various narrative media (not just semiotic) in the 70’s is, according to Fawaz, one main facilitator of transformation, as “transformation is only ever made possible through the endless proliferation of forms” (11).

While Fawaz’s concept of transformation aligns with my perspective to some extent—particularly in linking structure and signification—my approach differs significantly in scope. My research, similar to Fawaz’s, examines how “formal constructs” (in my case, narrative elements, such as perspective, focalisation, temporality, and narrative space, among others) “convey or translate [...] aspects” of identities related to gender (7), specifically by emphasising the interdependence of form and content in gender-conscious novels. However, my work does not specifically address “the most heterogeneous aspects of gender and sexual non-conformity”, as Fawaz underlines (7). While my primary texts bring diverse dimensions (and intersections) of identity, sexuality and gender to the fore—including Black motherhood, non-binary transness, immigration and queerness, or immigration and

intersexuality—my aim has not been to select and centre “the *most* heterogeneous” gender and sexual elements.

This is because I do not approach gender as the object of my analysis, as Fawaz often does, since his research objectives are naturally different from mine, nor do I focus exclusively on how gender is narratively manifested in my chosen texts, even though this aspect is indeed one part of my broader research aims. Rather, my primary objective is to demonstrate how gender can serve as a conduit between form and content. By examining gender through a formalist lens—and, by extension, as both a medium for and activator of narrative processing—I seek to illustrate how narratological thinking can illuminate various interpretations of texts that engage directly with gender, without prioritising either the analysis of form at the expense of queer- and gender-conscious significations, or vice versa. As a result, selecting “the most heterogeneous aspects of gender and sexual nonconformity” (18) would contradict the purpose of my project, which is to explore a spectrum of narratives—some of which might exhibit more gender-conforming elements than others but are, nevertheless, queer. In other words, my intention is not to examine how *non-conforming* gender functions as a bridge between form and content, but rather how *gender* operates in this capacity.

One key difference in our approaches is that Fawaz adopts an interdisciplinary perspective. His work draws from queer theory, feminist theory, film studies, and literary studies while exploring various generic forms—not just textual—in different media in order to analyse “how culture facilitates affective transformation” (11). A narratological perspective on how the textual form of queer identities is constructed

seems particularly relevant to these theoretical discussions, as there remains room for further exploration of the narrative nuances of form, gender, and transformation. In addition, as previously mentioned, I view transformation not only as an object of study—examining how the primary texts narrate transformation—but also as a methodological process.

Adopting a transitive lens allows me to analyse the narrative structures of these novels by exploring how the functions of structural elements fluctuate, merge and transition into one another throughout the storytelling process. While Fawaz similarly frames transformation as a formalist methodology for examining how queerness shifts and changes forms, my approach is rooted in a distinctly narratological perspective. My central aim, therefore, lies in the intersection between narratology and queer studies—an intersection made possible through contextual narratology, which forms the theoretical foundation of my approach to transformation.

Coming back to transformation, Fawaz also uses what he calls “queer formalism” as an interpretative tool, and calls attention to the reading of queer forms as “any material shape, construct, or pattern that is articulated to, or comes to be inhabited by, some aspect of gender and sexual nonconformity or divergence” (36). An example of queer form would be “a drawing of a gay male sex act rendered within the frame of a traditional square comic strip panel” (36). The main difference between Fawaz’s approach and mine in studying forms is that Fawaz conceives of certain formal characteristics, structures or genres as traditional, and examines how they are re-signified by their kinship to a non-conforming aspect of gender or sexuality. In my approach, I do not conceive of certain structural elements as inherently traditional

(e.g. the concept of narrative space per se) or show how their inscription in a queer context (textual and contextual) queers them.

Instead, I focus on how structural elements of narrative have been traditionally approached and utilised by classical narratology, and how they can be re-examined in relation to gender through a postclassical, feminist lens in order to reveal (new) gender-conscious significations. Put differently, I am more interested in studying how certain implementations of form (as entailed in narratological concepts such as perspective, metafiction, focalisation, etc.—in narratives that tell a story about transformation), reject the normative functionality of classical narratology and, instead, transform the narratologists' expectations. When I talk about how a specific functionality of a certain narratological notion is queering the structure of the narrative, I mean that it queers the expected functionality according to traditional narratology. In doing so, I hope to showcase the importance of contextual, feminist narratology in discussions about form while also according significance to queer- and gender-conscious interpretations.

Therefore, what I propose is a methodology that includes transformation as its theoretical principle, and uses a narratological toolkit to study narrative structures, without succumbing to an over-idealisation of structure in terms of typologies and categories that resemble those of classical narratology. At the same time, I also strive for an understanding of narrative form which is influenced by gender and queer narrative studies but is not defined solely by them, so much so that, in pursuing the arguing for gender-significant meaning-making, the study of narrative structures is heavily dismissed as unimportant, excessive or futile.

Another queer theorist whose work intersects with mine is Teagan Bradway. In her essay “Queer Narrative Form and the Relationality of Queerness” (2021), Bradway rightfully draws attention to the skepticism and resistance that queer theory has historically encountered regarding the concept of narrative form, which has traditionally been viewed as a “conservative form that contains the unruly energies of sexuality” (711). In this context, it is no surprise that narrative has often been seen as fundamentally at odds with or antagonistic towards queerness. In contrast, Bradway contends, the notion of anti-narrativity emphasises the inherent unruliness and non-(con)forming essence of queerness, rendering it “foundational to queer studies” and “a default principle” (711).

Similar to Bradway’s trajectory, yet from a different standpoint, that of contextual narratology, I also argue against the assumption that “narrative [does not] always work on behalf of the normative” (712), contending that narrative can, in fact, expose the limitations and fallacies of normativity. I demonstrate this specifically by bringing attention to the limitations of many normative scientific approaches that stem from the field of narrative studies, such as classical narratology, to argue for the need for a more expansive narratological approach to form, particularly when it comes to queer narratives. I analyse how in the same way that queerness disrupts the presumption of heteronormativity, it also often narratively manifests itself in a way that both disrupts the typical categorisation and typologies of narrative structures, and reveals an additional manner through which narratologists and theorists of narrative can study elements of context such as gender. This additional way is precisely the study of elements of context, such as gender, in relation to how they interact, intratextually, with narrative structures and narrative classifications.

Bradway, on the other hand, approaches this differently. For her, the main way to counteract the resistance that arises between narrativity and queerness is to “theoris[e] narrative as a form that fosters queer relationality” and to argue for a “strategic formalism” (712). Strategic formalism recognises narrative as a system, as “an ecology of interdependent forms—aesthetic and nonaesthetic—in contiguous torsion with one another” (712). Bradway underscores the role of narrative in engaging with surrounding forms by clashing with them, *shaping them* and, in turn, *being shaped by them* (712; my italics). Although she does not explicitly refer to it, I interpret this as an allusion to the notion of transformation, not merely as a narrative discipline, but also as a methodology that allows (strategic) formalism to emerge.

Even though both Bradway and I are highly interested in narrative form and the relationship between narrative structures and their connection to queer identity, our research stemming from different starting points (mine from contextual narratology and hers from queer narrative theory) reveals different objects of study. Unlike Bradway who “articulates a queer narrative theory, which asks how narrative – and other forms thought to abet heteronormativity – elicits, arranges, and sustains queer bonds in and across time” (713), my work does not focus exclusively on the relationship between narrative and queer relationality. Although my primary texts do foreground nuances of queerness, challenging heteronormative concepts of identity formation (some texts significantly more than others), my methodology and the objective of my research does not apply only to queer texts “that abet heteronormativity” but also pertains to any other narrative that tells a story about transition, about transformation.

Naturally, the notion of transformation is particularly inherent to the queer experience, as has already been shown by both Rafaz and Bradway. And it would be undoubtedly productive to have exclusively queer bonds studied by a queer narratologist under the scope of transformation, by looking at, for example, how the various structural elements of a story about queer bonding change forms to reveal different functions, as these bonds change shape and mould into different manifestations of queer bonding as well. At the same time, however, I do not see this methodology of narrative analysis only exclusive to themes of queerness and queer bonding.

So, equally, it would be interesting to see this methodological approach come to life with texts that deal with the theme of transformation but are not necessarily queer narratives, yet they explore gender even in a more (hetero)normative way. This is not the approach that I have adopted, but it would nevertheless be interesting to see it come to fruition, as it would help theorists study both the extent of usefulness and the limitations of the notion of transformation. And in doing so, they would also study and test the consideration of gender as a formal element of narrative through a different framework.

But how can the study of narrative form through a transitive lens illustrate the potential functionality of gender in narrative analysis? In her book *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (2015), Caroline Levine proposes a new formalist method that combines narrative/aesthetic and social forms, defining form as “all shapes and configurations, all ordering principles, all patterns of repetition and difference” (3). When examining the relationship between narrative form and gender in textual

contexts specifically, Levine views them as two different—and simultaneously equal—forms, “each striving to impose its own order, both travelling from other places to the text in question” (16). I find myself both agreeing and disagreeing with this viewpoint, for the following reasons. Similarly to Levine, I regard gender and narrative as two separate forms as well in my research; however, my perspective does not see each form as “striving to impose its own order” (16). On the contrary, I perceive the two as interilluminating and interdependent—as the foundational structural elements of a narrative (such as temporality, space, characterisation, etc.) that work in conjunction with gender, with the latter functioning to activate and potentially resignify these narrative structures.

In this sense, gender operates as another form, yet it is not identical to the structural elements of a narrative. This is because these foundational elements are textual and inherent to the narrative form, whereas gender has historically been considered in literary theory as contextual (if not entirely extratextual). Contrary to Levine’s viewpoint, both forms do not “travel to the text in question”, as they do not originate from the same external source; while gender may be external to discourse, narrative is not. Yet, I argue that through the lens of contextual narratology, it is possible to utilise such a contextual element to examine its intratextual functions. When we do this, we realise that—in specific texts which I define as gender-conscious—the interdependence between structural forms (including various structural elements of narrative, such as perspective and focalisation) and contextual forms (specifically, gender) is both undeniable and noteworthy. Although my analysis cannot naturally account for all contextual elements, gender is the focal point of my narratological examination.

Concerning the relationship between form and content, Levine also argues that “rather than hunting for the buried content of the form”, she instead “tracks the forms of the content, the many organising principles that encounter one another inside as well as outside of the literary text” (16). In my own research, I perceive this as two sides of the same coin, rather than two antithetical methodological positions. By examining the notion of transformation in a dual manner, I assert that the theme of transformation can be reflected in the various changes that occur among the structural elements of the narratives in question. In other words, I aim to demonstrate how the structural transformations of a narrative that tells a story about a kind of transformation reflect these thematic transitions. Concurrently, I also examine how the thematic transformations reflect the structural ones, creating a mirror-like relationship between form and content, where not one part of the relationship precedes or rules the other, but rather where both parts construct the full narrative in question together, providing fuller significations and, potentially, deeper interpretations.

Towards a Postclassical Narratology: A Narratological Turn to the Consideration of Narrative Form in Context

It is not surprising to note that narratology was originally established on a strictly formalist foundation rather than a contextual one. At the beginning of the 20th century, literary criticism was centred around a movement that amplified the autonomy of art as form: Russian Formalism. For Formalists, literature was conceived as a phenomenon per se, detached from cultural and historical influences, as well as from a content-bound approach to narrative analysis. Moving towards Structuralism and a progressively universal view of narrative poetics, Claude Lévi Strauss underlined

the Formalists' methodological limitations in not realising that "[f]orm and content are of the same nature, amenable to the same type of analysis" (Strauss, "Structure and Form" 179). He argued that "Formalism destroys its object" as Formalists "have passed from the concrete to the abstract but can no longer come down to the concrete", having reduced a plethora of narratives to a singular archetypal narrative whose monolithic analysis engulfs the various individual cases ("Structure and Form" 180).

At the core of this shift towards a more inclusive and universal approach to narratives, the term "narratology" was coined. Specifically, the "new paradigm" for "the formation of narratology as a methodologically coherent, structure-oriented variant of narrative theory" was announced in a 1966 special issue of the journal *Communications*, which included articles by leading structuralists Roland Barthes, Umberto Eco, Gérard Genette, Algirdas Julien Greimas, Tzvetan Todorov and Christian Metz.³ One of the most valuable theses of Structuralism came in 1969 from Todorov with his seminal work *Grammaire du Décaméron* (or *Grammar of the Decameron*). Todorov—by applying a grammatical logic to analyse narrative—creates a "grammar" which connects grammatical aspects of language (verbs, nouns, adjectives) to structural elements of stories (actions, characters, attributes) as the basis for the exploration of the general structure of all narratives.

The same book also marked narratology's recognition as a distinct theory of narrative that focuses on the general logical and structural properties of all narratives (*Grammaire* 9-10). Another significant contribution to the enhancement of narratological analysis came from Gérard Genette in 1972. In *Narrative Discourse: An*

³ Jan Christoph Meister, "Narratology", *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, Paragraph 34.

Essay In Method, Genette brought together narrative form and narrative content under the scope of narratological analysis, showcasing how form can illuminate the understanding and signification of the narrative content. He presented a narratological taxonomy based on three axes of reference—tense, mood and voice (namely, narrative temporality, narrative modalities and the instance of enunciation respectively)—always with regard to the relationship between narrative discourse and narrated story.

In the following two decades, Poststructuralism dominated narrative studies, and researchers in narrative poetics expanded the understanding of what the concept of narrative entails. This reevaluation leads to a cross-textual and, more importantly, intermedial view of stories that opposes the prior conception of narratives as purely textually determined phenomena. Seymour Chatman⁴, Jonathan Culler⁵, Peter Brooks⁶ and Mieke Bal⁷ demonstrate a plethora of narrative analyses by importing tools and theories from different disciplines. In 1986, Susan Lanser with her famous essay “Toward a Feminist Narratology” argues for the inclusion of gender as a systematic narratological category in the analysis and interpretation of narratives, while also exemplifying the need for a new methodological lens that departs from feminist studies but is also deeply grounded in the structuralist and precise ways of narratology. As I will elaborate in the next section, Lanser’s work has significantly shaped what is now recognized as postclassical and contextual -particularly feminist and queer- narratology, placing the analysis of narrative form and its various structural elements in dialogue with gender-conscious interpretations.

⁴ *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*.

⁵ “Story and Discourse in the Analysis of Narrative” (169–87).

⁶ *Reading for the Plot. Design and Intention in Narrative*.

⁷ *Narratology. Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*.

The same year, Thomas G. Pavel in his book *Fictional Worlds* proposed the fictional worlds model, which frames—in both literary and philosophical manner—fiction with respect to its relation to the human capacity of invention and the complex requirements of imagination. In 1988, Lubomir Doležel, in his essay “Mimesis and Possible Worlds”, extended Pavel’s fictional worlds model into the possible worlds theory. On this same path, Marie-Laure Ryan in her book *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence, and Narrative Theory* analyses the connection between the possible worlds theory and the simulation paradigm of Artificial Intelligence, showcasing further narratology’s methodological possibilities that extend beyond the solely textual realm of the analysis and interpretation of narrative form.

The narratological turn from a classical to a postclassical perspective on narratology is situated in David Herman’s seminal work *Narratologies: New Perspectives on Narrative Analysis* (1999). The plurality, which is entailed in the book’s title, calls direct attention to the heterogeneity of the various concepts of narrative that are brought together in the book, as a direct reflection of the time’s contemporary narratological discussions that foregrounded the “structuralists’ concern for systematicity with a renewal of interest in the cultural and philosophical issues of history and ideology” (Meister).⁸ The main “narratologies” that originate from the response to the aforesaid renewal of interest are feminist narratology, cognitive

⁸ Jan Christoph Meister, “Narratology”, *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, Paragraph 44.

narratology⁹, rhetorical narratology¹⁰ and postcolonial narratology¹¹; these are also considered to be subcategories of the following overarching term that designates the narrative turn of the period: postclassical/contextual narratology.

To begin with, as far as feminist narratology is concerned, Susan Lanser, with her book *Narrative Act: Point of View in Prose Fiction*, introduced in 1981 the main aspects of her narrative theory, which are then further unveiled and developed in her 1986 article "Toward a Feminist Narratology". In *Narrative Act*, Lanser examines the narrative concept of narrative voice and, specifically, point of view, by underlining the relationship between technique and ideology, textual and extratextual structures, and,

⁹ The term is initially introduced by Manfred Jahn in his 1997 essay "Frames, Preferences, and the Reading of Third-Person Narratives: Toward a Cognitive Narratology", two years prior to Herman's *Narratologies*, even though the origins of its theoretical inquiry can be traced even earlier. According to Herman, cognitive narratology comprises the cross-disciplinary field that researches the analysis and interpretation of the mind-narrative nexus and focuses on "the mental states, capacities, and dispositions that provide grounds for -or, conversely, are grounded in- narrative experiences" ("Cognitive narratology", *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, Paragraph 1).

¹⁰ One of the most influential books in the postclassical regard is Richard Walsh's 2007 monograph *The Rhetoric of Fictionality*, in which he attends to the re-examination of "fundamental questions in narrative theory through the prism of a new conception of the rhetoric of fictionality" (7). By looking at fictionality as "a distinctive rhetorical resource functioning directly as part of the pragmatics of serious communication", Walsh argues for a foregrounding of the rhetoric of fiction as "a bridge between extrinsic and intrinsic criticism, between ideology and formalism, or between the text as symptom and the text as oracle" (*The Rhetoric of Fictionality* 6). Unlike the traditional narratological approach to narratives, which proposes the logical subordination of the communicative function of fiction to its representational function (which is reflected in the logical priority of story over discourse), Walsh's perspective foregrounds the narrative's communicative frame as bigger than the utterance that entails it and closer to real-world communication. See also: "Fictionality as Rhetoric: A Distinctive Research Paradigm" (2019).

¹¹ In 2018's *Narratology and Ideology: Negotiating Context, Form, and Theory in Postcolonial Narratives*, edited by Divya Dwivedi, Henrik Skov Nielsen and Richard Walsh, postcolonial narratives are approached through a contextual narratological standpoint, whose imperative is put "keep both formalism and ideology into play" (Alber and Fludernik 2). Context is realised in this approach as the frame of communication from which narrative transpires and in which it is situated. Ideology, similarly, lies equally between "the representational specific of the text (and its referents) and the abstract relations that govern cultural manifestations of power" (Alber and Fludernik 5). Other significant texts that have shaped the field of postcolonial narratology are, among others, Monika Fludernik's "When the Self is an Other" and "Is there a Postcolonial Sublime?", Marion Gymnich's "Linguistics and Narratology. The Relevance of Linguistic Criteria to Postcolonial Narratology", Roy Sommer's "Contextualism' Revisited: A Survey (and Defence) of Postcolonial, Intercultural Narratologies", Brian Richardson's "U.S. Ethnic and Postcolonial Fiction: Toward a Poetics of Collective Narratives" and Sue J. Kim's "Introduction. Decolonizing Narrative Theory".

ultimately, the relationship between the narrative/writing act and the “material, social, psychological” contextual elements that inform it (Lanser 5). When Lanser writes in her introduction that “[m]y training is deeply formalist and my perspective [is] deeply feminist”, she demonstrates comprehension of “form as content and ideology as form” and cultivates a radical viewpoint on the epistemic contiguity between formalist methods and feminist lenses of signification (*Narrative Act 7*). Gender pertains heavily to the aforementioned nexus in Lanser’s analysis, as it affects the ways that point of view—a notion so sociopolitically charged—is both being shaped by and at the same time shapes the writing and reading of stories (*Narrative Act 7*).

A very important part of the signification of point of view through the study of a literary text’s formal elements, is the central positioning of the text’s dual function as a communicative and aesthetic act. Communication is conceived here within the context of speech act theory, namely, the admission that a narrative discourse is being performed with the purpose of transferring linguistic meaning within a specific communicative context which is dependent on the cognitive dynamic between the creator of the message (the author of a story) and the receiver of such message (the reader of that story). The writing act of literature is, in other words, approached as a combination of intentionality from the standpoint of the writing subject as they construct the narrative’s language, as well as intentionality from the standpoint of the receiving subject, as they infer signification from the aforesaid construction of language. At the same time, this communicative interaction is realised in a specific context that renders the various cognitive elements between creator and receiver similar in order for the communicative process to take place.

Lanser, therefore, argues that in attempting to analyse literary communication within the speech act frame, “structural analysis then becomes not a matter of extracting the ‘message’ or one of its formal elements out of the system and analysing it in a use-free vacuum, but of encountering the speech act which the text makes possible” (*Narrative Act* 62-63). Through *The Narrative Act*, not only does she foreground the rhetoric in both the creation and reception of literature, but she posits point of view as the interface of this interconnected relationship between a) the intentionality of the author to construct meaning and b) the intentionality of the reader to infer it.

Five years after the publication of *The Narrative Act*, Susan Lanser’s article titled “Toward a Feminist Narratology” (1986) came out, coining the term and shaping the new discipline based on the radical demonstration of the intersection between feminist criticism and narratology. Her objective, specifically, is “to ask whether feminist criticism, and particularly the study of narratives by women, might benefit from the methods and insights of narratology and whether narratology, in turn, might be altered by the understandings of feminist criticism and the experience of women’s texts” (“Toward a Feminist Narratology” 342). In her essay, Lanser analyses and interprets a dually written letter which constructs a double narrative under censorship, namely, the surface text and subtext. She examines the two voices in structural and semiotic terms, while also proposing the study of the category of “tone” in combination with the rhetorical context of narrative (namely, “public and private narration”). The latter serves to decode the two narrative voices of the letter to showcase “a function of the relationship between the deep and superficial structures of an illocutionary act (e.g., the relationship between an act of judgement and the

language in which the judgment is expressed)", and to examine those as determinants of narrative signification ("Toward a Feminist Narratology" 349).

The main oppositional thesis to Lanser's came from Nilli Diengott through her article "Narratology and Feminism" (1988), which severely criticises the former's methodology and argumentation. Diengott responds to Lanser in a dual way; first by arguing against the proposed relationship between feminist criticism and narratology by identifying each discipline's separate objective, and then by demonstrating how Lanser's model is inadequate in foregrounding gender and tone as distinct categories of narrative analysis. Criticism, Diengott argues, drawing from Benjamin Hrushovsky's terminology, focuses on the study of literature in its historical existence, as its objective is the "actual life of literature" (44). Poetics (theoretical and descriptive), on the other hand, focuses on the study of "literature as literature" since each subcategory's objective comprises, respectively, the theoretical system of literature and the exhaustive description of that system in a single work (Diengott 44). A third subcategory, historical poetics, examines—among other objectives—the aforesaid system in its evolution through history, as well as the history of the genre from which the literary system stems. Lastly, Interpretation focuses on a specific work as its object of inquiry is the specific work's meaning.

Therefore, according to Diengott, narratology and feminist criticism cannot go together due to their distinct methods and objectives. Lanser compares the two disciplines and brings them together, but the comparison is not feasible to begin with, from the perspective of Diengott, since they are two completely different academic domains whose research outcomes contrast with one another. In response to the

positioning of gender as a distinct narrative category, Diengott also highlights that narratology is concerned with the various definitions, categorisations and taxonomies that attend to describing the system behind narratives, and argues for the field's gender-indifferent nature. In contrast, gender is naturally of interest to criticism and interpretation—rather than narratology—due to their objects of study, which are highly dependent on context in order to extract meaning (“Narratology and Feminism” 45). Diengott, then, proceeds to argue that the letter which Lanser pursued an analysis of does not constitute a narrative but, instead, a “description—covert and overt—of the husband and the wife’s feelings towards him” (47). She, lastly, responds to Lanser’s proposition concerning the narratological study of tone and highlights that tone is, on one hand, subjective to interpretation, and, on the other, a phenomenon of psychology, rendering it indifferent to narratology and narrative poetics.

The first book of feminist narratology was published in 1989, written by Robyn Warhol. In *Gendered Interventions: Narrative Discourse in the Victorian Novel*, Warhol illustrates the mutual illumination of feminist theory and narratology in realist novels written in the mid-nineteenth century, including George Eliot, Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell and William Thackeray among others. This book-length study focuses on a gendered difference in the ways male narrators are generally more self-consciously distancing, literary, and metafictional, whereas female narrators are generally more engaging, earnest, and reality-directed in their interventions. In 1996, Judith Roof in *Come as You Are: Sexuality and Narrative* brought together narrative theory, gay and lesbian theory as well as theories of sexuality to explore the concept of homosexuality in semiotic narratives (ranging from films, TV shows and novels), making a significant contribution to the developing field of an expansive narrative and

cultural theory. By studying the structuring of Western narratives, she analyses the enforcement of the heterosexual paradigm by identifying it as reproductive, identifies the lesbian paradigmatic story and focuses on its potential recasting, and attends to the ways that ideas of narrative and sexuality inform, determine, and reproduce one another.

Fifteen years after “Toward a Feminist Narratology” and ten years after “Narratology and Feminism”, Gerald Prince’s article titled “Narratology, Narratological Criticism and Gender” was published in response to Lanser’s position in favor of “an expansive narratology” that takes into consideration contextual parameters such as gender for the analysis and interpretation of literary texts (“Narratology, Narratological Criticism and Gender” 160). His overall standpoint lies somewhere between Lanser’s and Diengott’s, in that he renders Lanser’s proposal towards narratologists to expand their object of inquiry an important one to consider. At the same time, he echoes Diengott when he explains that Lanser’s further inquiry for a contextually aware interpretation of texts pertains to the field of narratological criticism (namely, to the study of the meaning of specific narratives under specific circumstances), rather than to narratology (that is, to “the description of the ways in which all and only narratives make sense”) (“Narratology, Narratological Criticism and Gender”163).

In support of this argument, he draws attention to the fact that categories which describe the narrator’s diegetic presence and identity in a story (such as the narrator’s participation in the storyworld and, by extension, the characterisations of extra- or homo-diegetic) are categories that can be found in every narrative. In contrast, not all narratives disclose the narrator’s gender—raising the broader

question of whether narratological categories inherently constitute and designate a narrating subject, and if so, whether that subject must be gendered (Prince, "Narratology, Narratological Criticism and Gender" 162).

To determine the inclusivity of and applicability to narratological models of categories such as gender, Prince points to the criterion of productivity. By productivity, he designates their potential "importance in 'adequate' accounts of narrative possibilities as well as [...] their capacity to raise new and narratively pertinent problems (on plot structure, say, on narrative domains and energetics, on narrative speed and frequency)" ("Narratology, Narratological Criticism and Gender" 162). Apart from sex or gender, Prince also refers to notions such as race, class, age, ethnicity, or height and weight. To prove their effectiveness in being productive generators of narratological significations, he proposes "subsuming them under the rubric *distance* (the space obtaining between narrator, characters, events narrated, and narratee, a space that can be temporal, intellectual, emotional, etc.) or even [...] subsuming that rubric under them" ("Narratology, Narratological Criticism and Gender" 162). The conclusion that Prince draws constitutes a call to narratologists to "devise ways of testing the possible influence of factors like gender on narrative production and processing", as a vital part of examining the functioning of narratives and, therefore, of such categories of context that can assumingly and potentially affect the aforesaid functioning ("Narratology, Narratological Criticism and Gender" 164).

A few years later, in 2006, Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle edited the first volume of *The Transgender Studies Reader*, which constitutes the first significant

contribution to the field of transgender and narrative studies. Donna Haraway,¹² Judith Butler,¹³ Leslie Feinberg,¹⁴ Sandy Stone,¹⁵ Jay Prosser,¹⁶ and Heather Love,¹⁷ along with Stryker¹⁸ and Whittle¹⁹ themselves, are only a few of the contributors to this foundational edition. In 2013, *The Transgender Studies Reader 2* was published, edited by Stryker and Aren Z. Aizura, which focused on emerging trends of the rapidly changing discipline of trans studies, while also building further on the increasingly interdisciplinary scholarship on feminist, trans and narrative inquiries.

One of the most important contributions to the expansion of feminist narratology lies in its intersection with queer and gender studies, which have significantly broadened the scope of narratological inquiries. In 2015, Robyn Warhol and Susan Lanser in *Narrative Theory Unbound: Queer and Feminist Interventions* integrated feminist, queer, and narrative theory to explore gender and sexuality in relation to the production, reception, forms, and functions of narrative texts. In the introduction, “Toward (a Queerer and) More (Feminist) Narratology”, Lanser advocates for an intersectional narratology that “mov[es] beyond the confines of literary scholarship to reveal the narrative formations in feminist and queer studies broadly conceived” (24). Furthermore, Lanser reiterates her historically significant proposition, first articulated²⁰ in *Narrative Act: Point of View in Prose Fiction* when she

¹² “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century”.

¹³ “Doing Justice to Someone: Sex Reassignment and Allegories of Transsexuality”.

¹⁴ “Transgender Liberation: A Movement Whose Time has Come”.

¹⁵ “The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto”.

¹⁶ “Judith Butler: Queer Feminism, Transgender, and the Transubstantiation of Sex”.

¹⁷ “Selections from ‘Spoiled Identity’: Stephen Gordon’s Loneliness and the Difficulties of Queer History”.

¹⁸ “My Words to Viktor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage”.

¹⁹ “Where Did We Go Wrong? Feminism and Trans Theory – Two Teams on the Same Side?”.

²⁰ More articles of Lanser that return to this thesis are: “Shifting the Paradigm: Feminism and Narratology”; “Queering Narratology”; “Sexing Narratology, Toward a Gendered Poetics of Narrative Voice”.

emphasises the understanding of “form as content and ideology as form” (7), underscoring the necessity of studying “narrative form as narrative content” (“Toward (a Queerer and) More (Feminist) Narratology” 25). Specifically, regarding the expansiveness of narratology throughout the years, Lanser famously underlines that “[i]f in the 1980s and 1990s [she] was urging narrative studies to be queerer and more feminist, [she’s] now urging feminist and queer studies -and even narrative studies- to be more narratological”, underscoring that “the benefits of narratology remain undertapped” (“Toward (a Queerer and) More (Feminist) Narratology” 24).

Current Academic Discussions

The study of gender in relation to narrative theory and narratology is now more prominent than ever, placing gender at the forefront of narrative investigations. Specifically, *Narrative*, one of the most esteemed journals on narrative studies, recently published a special issue on trans narratology titled “Trans/forming Narrative Studies” (2024), which centres the transgender lived experience as a key locus of narrative inquiry. *Narrative’s* newest special issue constitutes the first issue that pertains to a journal on narratology that is exclusively devoted to trans narratives, “provid[ing] generous insights and concepts to what might become the theoretical toolbox of trans narratology” (Mejeur and Pellegrini 134). In the same issue, Lanser’s newest article, “Trans-Forming Narratologies”, examines various narrative elements—such as plot, temporality, narratee, narrator, embodiment, and character space—that are particularly pertinent to the analysis of trans narratives. Lanser also outlines different facets of a trans-narratological inquiry and proposes methodologies for future research in the field. These include, among others, the embodiment and

representation of trans characters over time, the different chronotopes in trans narratives based on the Bakhtinian concept, the various possible worlds evoked by different trans characters, and the alignment or divergence of trans narratives within and against specific plot types, like the Bildungsroman (Lanser 222). Overall, she advocates for a focus on trans narratives to deepen our understanding of trans literature and to advance the broader goal of developing a comprehensive, situated narratology.

On the other hand, Marco Caracciolo and Karin Kukkonen with their book-length study *With Bodies Narrative Theory and Embodied Cognition* (2021) recently foregrounded an embodied narratology that comes into dialogue with narrative elements in relation to fields like neuroscience, cognitive psychology and linguistics, and philosophy of the mind, with the purpose of investigating what it means to read literary narratives bodily. Furthermore, Chiara Pellegrini has been examining the relationship between gender and narrative form through the lens of narrative, queer, trans and cultural studies. In her doctoral thesis, *Trans Forms: Gender-Variant Subjectivity and First-Person Narration* (2022),²¹ Pellegrini focuses on the notion of narrative voice as expressed in categories such as focalisation, pronouns, metaphors, temporality etc., with regard to the difference those novels raise as implications to the gender-variant subject. She analyses, for instance, how the difficulty in the functioning of metalepsis in Ali Smith's 2014 novel *How to be Both* is related to the ambiguity of Francesco's gender (*Trans Forms* 143-144), and how historiographic metafiction in

²¹ Pellegrini's doctoral thesis is currently developed into a monograph titled *Trans Narrators: First-Person Form and the Gendered Body in Contemporary Literature* and is expected to be published in 2025 by Edinburgh University Press.

Middlesex, *Confessions of the Fox* and *Misfortune* “re-narrate[s] the withholding of knowledge, the policing of bodies [...] and either repeat[s] or challenge[s] these dynamics through narrative acts of looking, hiding and revealing” (*Trans Forms* 189).

My work aligns with this direction, interrogating how the narrative form signifies and mirrors the narrated content from a narratological perspective, with a focus on gender-conscious significations. However, my emphasis rests on the notion of transition, the process of changing form, of trans-forming throughout a narrative, while my research hypothesis posits that the various structures that compose a narrative undergo a transformation during the narrative's construction. Seen through that lens, formal elements such as focalisation, temporality, perspective, and metafiction are not fixed categories; rather, they are inherently and continuously constitutive. Unlike Pellegrini, for instance, who analyses specific narrative elements at particular points in a novel to illuminate themes related to gender-variant subjects (an undoubtedly productive and methodologically sound approach, aligned with her thesis objectives), my analysis encompasses the primary texts in their entirety. This allows me to illustrate the different variations of narrative structures as the story unfolds, capturing the duality that pertains to transformation: the identity transformation of the protagonists (thematic transformation) and the formal transitions of the narrative discourse (structural transformation).

My approach departs from several key points. Firstly, it naturally adheres to Lanser's idea of “form as content and ideology as form”, reflecting my own commitment to formalist roots and a feminist perspective (*Narrative Act* 7). It also echoes and responds to her stance that narratology remains significantly

underappreciated, advocating for a more narratological methodology in queer narrative studies (“Toward (a Queerer and) More (Feminist) Narratology” 24). In addition to feminist narratology, my analytical approach is informed by rhetorical narratology, particularly Walsh’s thesis on the rhetoric of fiction as “a bridge between extrinsic and intrinsic criticism, between ideology and formalism, or between the text as symptom and the text as oracle” (*The Rhetoric of Fictionality* 6). Lastly, my intention to draw from a narratological toolkit and explore gender in its interplay with a narrative’s structural elements responds to Prince’s call to narratologists to “devise ways of testing the possible influence of factors like gender on narrative production and processing”, as a vital part of examining the functioning of narratives and the contextual factors that can potentially affect this functioning (“Narratology, Narratological Criticism and Gender” 164).

As I have demonstrated in my literature review of the history of postclassical narratology, while many theorists have studied gender as a systematic category of narrative analysis, they have done so either on the basis of the gender of the narrator, the narratee or the reader. My approach, however, centres on the gender of the protagonist—not as an isolated element of their characterisation, but in relation to how this aspect interacts with the novel’s narrative structures. In other words, my aim is not to reduce a character to their gender, but to show how gender, as just one facet of a protagonist's character development (alongside personality, ethics, background, relationships, etc.), can illuminate different meanings and interpretations of a novel when approached intratextually and structurally. By “intratextually,” I refer to the process of examining an element in relation to the other textual components, with the

goal of decoding and interpreting the narrative as it unfolds, thereby treating form as content. As Lanser and Warhol put it,

[t]o the extent that narrative succeeds by covering the tracks of its own strategies, narratology provides a critical pathway to understanding how stories work and thus also to how they “hold” us. To the extent that those narrative strategies function as narrative content, stories cannot even be apprehended unless we can read them as form. (*Narrative Theory Unbound* 23)

My aim is to reveal “the covering of the tracks of [narratology’s] own strategies”, providing a comprehensive and methodologically rigorous approach that shows how postclassical narratology can illuminate the synthetic relationship between content and form by foregrounding gender-conscious significations without compromising structural analysis. In developing this series of arguments, I demonstrate how the tools and methodologies of postclassical narratology can significantly enhance the analysis and interpretation of thematic and contextual concepts of identity, such as gender, rendering narratology as a continuously relevant field of systematic analysis and practical inquiry. Concurrently, I contend that recognising gender as a potentially influential formal category in narrative processing is crucial for the further expansion of narratology.

Limitations

While my methodology is framed by structuralist and formalist approaches that aim for gender-conscious significations, and my focus is strictly narratological, rather than, for instance, psychoanalytic (exploring the connection between the characters’ gender and their psyche with respect to suppressed desires, parental/authorial figures

etc.), I acknowledge that my method does not, and cannot, account for what Prince refers to as “the description of the ways in which all and only narratives make sense” (“Narratology, Narratological Criticism and Gender”163). Although I study and approach gender in its intratextual interplay with structural elements of narrative—concepts that have been organised into rigid systems and taxonomies—I have not created a system designated for gendered categories that can be applied to “all and only narratives”. I have not, for instance, categorised gender into a tripartite distinction of female, male, and other (mimicking the distinction between autodiegetic, homodiegetic and heterodiegetic narrator), nor have I separated gender from sex as two entirely distinct categories with entirely distinct effects, despite their clear association (similar to focalisation and perspective, for instance).

Such a methodological approach would be interesting to explore, and there is potential for future research to systematically categorise gender across its various dimensions (biological sex, transness, sexuality, parenthood, etc.) or otherwise. Additionally, as Prince suggests, gender could potentially be studied as a subcategory within the concept of distance—“the space obtaining between narrator, characters, events narrated, and narratee, a space that can be temporal, intellectual, emotional, etc.”—or even as the overarching rubric itself that entails distance (“Narratology, Narratological Criticism and Gender” 162). If such an analytical standpoint proves to be effective in narrative processing, then the narratological premise for a “description of the ways in which all and only narratives make sense” will be successfully met (“Narratology, Narratological Criticism and Gender”163).

In contrast, my approach aims to emphasise not an all-encompassing systematisation applicable to all narratives, but rather the discovery of content within form and form within content, resulting in the examination of the co-constitutive function of this relationship, with gender serving as the conduit. The context for this process is specific to each narrative under consideration, as my narratological standpoint focuses on the rhetorical function of narratives, which is always contextual and not pre-determined. This, I believe, does not make my standpoint less narratological, but it also does not account for an all-encompassing and all-applicable utilisation of gender.

Finally, my research is non-dogmatic and non-exhaustive; although my approach and research hypothesis are based on six primary texts, this number is naturally insufficient for forming a comprehensive narratological theory regarding gender or transformation. However, since my main focus is on the dialogic relationship between narrative form and narrated story, I believe my approach can effectively initiate a potential analytical stance towards structural and thematic transformation in relation to identity formation. This research not only proposes how a narratological toolkit can be used to illuminate contextually based ideological significations but also serves as a starting point for further exploration of how structuralist approaches can foreground queer- and gender-conscious interpretations.

Segment One: Transformation in Metamorphosis

Chapter One

The Constancy of Incessant Change: Panoramic Temporality in *Orlando: A Biography* (1928) by Virginia Woolf

Introduction

It can be easily argued that temporality constitutes one of the most studied concepts in narrative theory, as well as one of the most complex and multi-dimensional ones. From Aristotle's *Poetics*, who first addressed the temporal structure of Tragedy and its "certain order in its arrangement of parts" (2322), to Paul Ricoeur's seminal three-volume work *Time and Narrative* (1984) and even contemporary explorations of the relationship between Artificial Intelligence and narrative time,²² the study of temporality has held a privileged position in narrative theory. Its significance is also evident in narratology's foundational terminology, specifically the distinction between narrative discourse and narrated story, or "sujet" and "fabula" as termed by the Russian Formalists.²³ At its core, the debate²⁴ over the logical primacy of these two aspects is fundamentally a discussion about temporality; specifically, whether the temporal sequencing of narrative incidents that constitute the plot (fabula) takes precedence over their arrangement through temporal markers at the

²² See, for instance, Mark Coeckelbergh's "Time Machines: Artificial Intelligence, Process, and Narrative".

²³ The terms were coined in 1925 by Viktor Shklovsky to designate the difference between what is told in a narrative (fabula) and how it is told (sujet). The same year, in his monograph *Theory of Literature*, Boris Tomaševskij further defined "fabula" as "the totality of motifs in their logical causal-temporal chain" and "sujet" as "the totality of the same motifs in that sequence and connectivity in which they are presented in the work" (Černov 40).

²⁴ For an elucidation of the relationship between fabula and sujet, as well as the presumption of the logical priority of the former over the latter, see Richard Walsh's "Fabula and Fictionality in Narrative Theory".

textual level (sujet), or vice versa. In other words, the issue of precedence centres on whether there is an inherent logic in the narrated events (fabula) that is *subsequently* translated into discourse (sujet), or whether it is the discourse that signifies the story *after* the latter is constructed.

The relationship between temporality and gender has been a central focus in *Orlando* scholarship, with significant contributions particularly from gender, queer, and trans theorists. Elizabeth Freeman in her book *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (2010) famously analysed Woolf's protagonist through the lens of "erotohistoriography" which "sees the body as a method, and historical consciousness as something intimately involved with corporeal sensations" (96), while also perceives the novel's convergence of the past and present as a "tactile meeting" (110). A few years later, Pamela M. Caughie in "The Temporality of Modernist Life Writing in the Era of Transsexualism" (2013) characterised *Orlando: A Biography* as "the prototype of the transgenre", a literary genre that describes "the narratives treating transgender lives that transfigure conventions of narrative diegesis" (503).

Moreover, Josh Mcloughlin (2016) examined the relationship between the protagonist's embodied alternative temporality and the embodiment of queer futurity by textuality itself, contending that "[t]he imaginative renderings of queer life-trajectories in [...] *Orlando* are at once impossible, and genuinely reparative" as they offer a queer alternative to the "normative, futural temporality" ("Queer Time in Woolf and Wilde"). One of the most recent contributions to the scholarship on the novel is Jessica Steidel's 2024 article, "Trans Times: Que(e)rying Normative Logics of Temporality, Gender, and Sexuality in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*", which examines how

the modernist conception of time intersects with the novel's genderfluid temporality and trans embodiment.

Steidel argues that Orlando's "transgender subjectivity queers and merges into an asynchronous continuum" (19), challenging the normative experience of both time and gender. While Steidel's argument resonates with my own, as I too view and analyse the protagonist's temporal embodiment as a continuum, our theoretical approaches diverge. My argument advocates for a contextual narratological reading of Woolf's novel—one that explores how queerness and fluidity take shape within the narrative, and, by extension, how these queer forms operate as what Fawaz describes as "enabling structures" that sustain the "practice of continually coming into being" (11), as articulated through Woolf's notion of incessant change.

In doing so, I seek to demonstrate that *Orlando's* narrative does not operate on behalf of the normative; rather, it reveals the limitations of normative categorisations of temporality in understanding queerness, and, in their place, constructs an alternative conception of narrative time. In other words, I propose examining narrative form through its structural elements—particularly temporality—and studying gender through its intratextual functions to reveal how Woolf's narrative engages with gender not only as thematic content (within the storyworld) but also structurally, by embedding it within the narrative infrastructure and positioning it vis-à-vis temporality. This demonstrates that the consideration of gender is central to both *Orlando's* meaning and formal analysis, not just as a contextual element but as an integral part of the narrative form, particularly when examined in tandem with key structural elements, most notably temporality.

To elucidate this argument, I firstly pursue a discussion of Woolf's concept of "the extraordinary discrepancy between time on the clock and the time in the mind" (68) and explore how this idea is navigated in the novel, with a focus on how it resists and challenges normative applications of classical narratology. I accord significance to the ways Woolf's reimagining of temporality queers traditional notions of time found in classical narratology, producing what Helen Palmer (2020) terms "queer defamiliarization" (35), as *Orlando* reshapes temporal structures through the narrative's underlying queerness—both in terms of gender and the experience of time. Drawing on Jan Alber's (2016) perspective of unnatural narratology, I read Woolf's narrative as "unnatural" (168), contending that it relies on temporal dissonance and non-linear time as a central narrative device upon which the novel's entire structure is built.

In addition, I draw from Kate McCullough's *Never on Time, Always in Time: Narrative Form and the Queer Sensorium* (2024) to analyse how the novel's "bodily-inhabited sense of queer time is mapped in [the] narrative" (2), and from Elizabeth Freeman's notion of "erotohistoriography" to discuss how history takes shape as corporeal and erotic sensations for the protagonist (95). In doing so, I illustrate how the novel foregrounds the body as time and time as body, suggesting that Orlando not only perceives the passage of time and the world's continual transformation, but more crucially, comes to *embody* these temporal shifts. Subsequently, I examine the convergence of synchronic and diachronic approaches within the novel, departing from their typical mutual exclusivity to foster a cohesive and comprehensive understanding of identity and gender both in and across time. My focus here is on how past, present, and future intersect within the narrative, and how this intersection is

textually rendered through the novel's narrative discourse—specifically via the interplay between diegetic time and story time—ultimately complicating the binary between synchrony and diachrony.

Furthermore, I draw from Mikhail Bakhtin's "chronotope" (1981), narrative theory's potentially most influential concept on time, to illustrate how *Orlando's* narrative manifestation of transformation diverges from its literary tradition as traced in Bakhtin. I argue that the Bakhtinian notion of "unity" (113) evolves into the concept of temporal continuum within Woolf's novel, as the notions of movement and development take on a temporal significance. Just like Orlando evades temporal normativity and gender normativity, he/she also evades generic normativity, in relation to which I discuss how the novel critiques the biographic normative time. A further aim of this approach is to demonstrate that transformation operates not merely as a central theme in the novel, but more significantly as a mechanism for—and process of—shaping queer identity.

Finally, I examine how the contiguity between temporality and embodiment is reflected in the narrative discourse. The narration of the "present moment" (Woolf, *Orlando* 206), which also marks the novel's conclusion, introduces a disjunction between diegetic time and story time, a stasis—a narrative pause—that mirrors Orlando's internal stillness as she fully immerses herself in her selfhood and in the immediacy of the present. I specifically argue that Woolf's use of the phrase "[i]t was the present moment" (206) subverts the conventional assumption that the past tense is employed solely for retrospective storytelling, and in doing so, the narrative foregrounds the fluidity and continuity between history and contemporaneity,

between past and present. The thematic function of this linguistic and temporal convergence—this “fusing”—is to illustrate, at the level of discourse, the expansive temporal panorama the novel constructs both structurally and thematically.

My goal in exploring the above is to highlight the dialogic relationship between narrative form and content, specifically, how the temporal shifts in narrative discourse (namely, the various transformations of temporality as a structural element) mirror the protagonist's transformation in terms of gender and identity. By doing so, I conclude that the malleability of temporality on the level of narrative discourse comprises the narrative manifestation of the fluidity that Orlando's gender entails, demonstrating the interdependence and interillumination between two dimensions of transformation—structural and thematic. This approach contributes to the broader argument of the thesis, which advocates for a type of formalism that examines gender through a formalist lens and, conversely, narrative form through a gender-conscious lens, in order to highlight the significance of contextual narratology in gender- and queer-conscious significations.

Temporal Strangeness: Time on the Clock and Time in the Mind

It is reasonable to assert that *Orlando: A Biography*, even from its premise, foregrounds an entirely unconventional form of temporal progression; the narrative follows an adolescent nobleman and poet whose sex shifts from male to female overnight without a provided explanation, and whose life spans from the sixteenth-century Elizabethan period to twentieth-century England, culminating on October 11, 1928, when the protagonist is in her mid-thirties. The transformation and life of Orlando, then, also aligns with and mirrors the transformation of the English world

throughout the centuries (from the people's customs, clothing and social roles to London's changing topography), while also engendering a parallel microscopic timeline to Vita Sackville West's life, for whom Woolf wrote and published the novel. Intertwined in this relatively short novel, all these temporal elements weave one of the most famous tales of metamorphosis in modern Western literature. In the context of *Orlando*, metamorphosis is depicted as a complete change of physical form from one sex to another, brought about by supernatural means.

One of the most captivating concepts of time, which is emphasised in the novel and at the same time encompasses Virginia Woolf's autobiographical writings, is the relationship between "the time on the clock and the time in the mind" (68), as depicted here:

But Time, unfortunately, though it makes animals and vegetables bloom and fade with amazing punctuality, has no simple effect upon the mind of man. The mind of man, moreover, works with equal strangeness upon the body of time. An hour, once it lodges in the queer element of the human spirit, may be stretched to fifty or a hundred times its clock length; on the other hand, an hour may be accurately represented on the time-piece of the mind by the second. This extraordinary discrepancy between time on the clock and time in the mind is less known than it should be and deserves fuller investigation.

(*Orlando* 68)

What Woolf describes in this passage is the distinction between chronological time ("time on the clock") and internal, personal time ("time in the mind"). While the former is dependent on stable deictics (such as clocks, natural cycles, etc.), thereby

comprising an entirely measurable entity, the latter is contingent upon much more complex systems of human existence. Woolf elucidates this perfectly in many of her autobiographical essays, particularly the “Sketch of the Past”, written in 1939, through the conceptualisation of memoir writing. In memoir writing, memories constitute the primary mode of non-typical temporality, in that they provide a subjective representation of time based on the individual’s relationship to the past events that are evoked as memories.

Woolf refers to memories as “impressions”, a term that emphasises both the temporal and sensory aspects of memory recall (“Sketch” 67). These “impressions” leave lasting marks by imprinting on an individual’s mind and can be retrieved through sensory stimuli; once traced back, they lead to the past moment or event that inspired them. More importantly, they represent a version of the past that may or may not be historically accurate, as they are formed unconsciously and without evidence of the original image that created them. In retrieving childhood memories in the process of constructing her memoir, Woolf accords significance to the consciousness of time’s passage, as time feels elongated in certain periods of our lives, such as childhood; a memory may be linked to a specific moment in time that lasts for seconds (“time on the clock”), but when it is imprinted with such intensity and curiosity in the childhood mind, writing it down causes it to expand textually, filling paragraphs, which is due to the elongation of the moment in the mind’s recollection (“time in the mind”).

In *Orlando*, this “extraordinary discrepancy” between the two different manifestations of time is portrayed in various ways. To begin with, one narrative instance that illustrates Woolf’s notion in simple and relatable terms is when the

protagonist attends a formal gathering. The discussions she participates in are so dull, except for “perhaps three witty sayings”, that the three hours she spends there feel as though “the fraction of three witty sayings lasted eighteen thousand two hundred and fifty nights” (Woolf, *Orlando* 139). In this instance, “time on the clock” is excruciatingly elongated in the protagonist's personal experience (“time in the mind”) due to the overwhelming boredom and lack of engaging conversation, making mere seconds feel like centuries. On the other hand, when Orlando converses about life and love with a young woman, Mistress Nell, she finds that she “had never known the hours speed faster or more merrily” (151). In this narrative instance, the duration of the conversation feels exceptionally brief to the protagonist (“time in the mind”), even though it spans several hours (“time on the clock”), due to its pleasant and fulfilling nature, thereby leaving her longing for more.

Apart from these relatively normative and familiar instances that describe the discrepancy between “the mind of man” and the “body of time” (68), the relationship between temporality and embodiment is further complicated in the novel. Although the protagonist ages only around thirty years in the span of four centuries, time does not pass linearly nor consistently, designating, for instance, that Orlando ages steadily ten years for every hundred years that pass. Instead, there are specific instances in which time passes differently than outside those instances, which results in Orlando ageing significantly more slowly. I refer to those temporal narrative moments as “non-sequential”, since the manipulation of time that is entailed does not conform to time’s linear perception or progression. Two of those circumstances that describe a non-sequential temporality are isolation and reminiscence. When the protagonist, particularly in the first half of the novel—before his metamorphosis—reserves time

for himself to reflect and mentally wander, he seems to embody a more elongated passing of time, as shown here:

[W]hen a man has reached the age of thirty, as Orlando now had, time when he is thinking becomes inordinately long; time when he is doing becomes inordinately short. [...] [D]irectly he was alone on the mound under the oak tree, the seconds began to round and fill until it seemed as if they would never fall. They filled themselves, moreover, with the strangest variety of objects. [...] In such thinking (or whatever name it should be called) he spent months and years of his life. It would be no exaggeration to say that *he would go out after breakfast a man of thirty and come home to dinner a man of fifty-five*. (68; my italics)

Although it is not explicitly stated that Orlando ages more slowly when reflecting on past experiences, the narrator employs hyperbole at the end of the passage which, despite being illogical as Orlando is not even forty years old when the novel concludes, encapsulates the novel's nature of time's passage and highlights the dissonance between Orlando's personal experience of time and the objectively measured chronological time.

What becomes clear is that the passage of time in the storyworld operates in ways that defy the possibilities of our real-world experience, rendering the novel's temporality unnatural. As Jan Alber discusses in his eponymous chapter in *Unnatural Narrative: Impossible Worlds in Fiction and Drama* (2016), "unnatural temporalities" refer to the ways in which the temporal structures of fictional narratives contradict our real-world understanding of time (168). The fact that Orlando ages at a drastically

different rate than the surrounding society suggests the presence of distinct reference systems at the level of the story, leading to what Alber calls “coexisting story times” (179). In fact, one could identify two such reference systems. One of these is Orlando’s, illustrated through his unnatural aging rate, while the other aligns with the conventional time of the world around him/her, as evidenced by the natural progression of epochs, shifting smoothly from century to century. Orlando’s story time, in particular, is defined by the relationship between “time on the clock” and “time in the mind”, which is amplified by non-sequential modes of temporality. On the other hand, the second story time operates within a framework familiar to readers, as the setting draws on real-world locations, events, and names. In this way, Woolf uses temporal dissonance and unnatural temporality as a central narrative device upon which the novel’s entire structure is built.

What is even more intriguing to consider are the implications of this temporal dissonance on narratology’s traditional approach to categorising and analysing narrative time. Core concepts of classical narratology, such as Genette’s notions of “duration” and “ellipsis”, are significantly challenged, highlighting the need to rethink the way that temporality is studied in queer texts from a narratological perspective. I argue that this requires employing diverse criteria, such as gender, specifically in relation to its intratextual functions, and adopting a more expansive narratological perspective, such as feminist and contextual narratology. According to Genette and his extensive study of narrative temporality in *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (1972), ellipsis indicates—either overtly or covertly—an elision in story time and its narrative compression in a phrase such as “two years later” or “after many years” and so on (106-109). Ellipsis is part of duration, a category which incorporates all temporal

relations between story time and diegetic/narrative time, that is, the time of events within the storyworld and the pseudo-time of arrangements of those events in the narrative respectively.

This temporal duality contributes significantly to the analysis and interpretation of a textual system of relationships since it binds form and meaning, narrative discourse and narrated story. In *Orlando's* case, the classical concept of ellipsis and duration is being defied as follows: a normative elliptical reference would imply a specific amount of story time (i.e., seconds, minutes, hours, days etc.) missing from the narrative, rendering the diegetic time longer than the story time, and suggesting an omission—explicit or implicit—of events. Nevertheless, due to the novel's unique convention regarding the nature of temporality, no events are really omitted by the narrator in those instances, since a few minutes of conventional story time may equal a few years of *Orlando's* non-conventional story time. Thus, it is not a matter of ellipsis when, less than twenty lines after references to “a June day” and “summer morning”, the season abruptly shifts to winter (Woolf, *Orlando* 70); rather, it is a matter of dissident time passing. The same can be observed a couple of pages later, when “the early sunshine of spring” is brought up, validating the exhilaration produced by the main character's deep reminiscing (72).

But how can one reconcile the need to examine this dissonance from a narratological perspective while also addressing the limitations of traditional approaches? Drawing from Helen Palmer's *Queer Defamiliarisation: Writing, Mattering, Making Strange* (2020), which attempts to bridge the gap between Russian Formalism and queer theory, I argue that Woolf's reframing of temporality has

queering effects on the normative conceptions of time in classical narratology. Palmer's overall argument rests on "the spatiotemporal movement and organization of language when it is made strange" and the conceptualisation of "queer defamiliarisation as a reconfiguration of linguistic spatiotemporality" (35). Palmer locates the prospect of queer defamiliarisation in Roman Jakobson's system of language and particularly his conception of poetic language across the horizontal syntagmatic and the vertical paradigmatic order of language. By arguing for "synvariance"—namely, the making strange of both linguistic orders by means of "reorientat[ing]" both syntax ("the logical stringing-together of words in order to make sense") and invariance ("the principle of constancy or universality")—Palmer connects language with identity formation (35).

In *Orlando*, although the syntactic function of language in the examples above is normative, in the sense that it delivers a linguistic logic which enables the reader to fully comprehend the words and the significations that the spatial sequence of words create, the temporal function of language—which is related to invariance—is far from normative. Due to the unique way that time passes in Woolf's novel, what would have otherwise been read as elliptical in the phrase "for two years and a half", for instance—since it implies an omission of information and a significant time-leap—is not interpretable as such in the novel's realm, because it is equated to "half an hour" in Orlando's life (Woolf, *Orlando* 70). Although both ellipsis and duration are textually depicted as syntactically correct in the novel, their hermeneutic role deviates from their usual role, since their presumed contribution to the text is regenerated and "ma[de] anew", illustrating a textual "moment by which sense is stripped of its habit

and its material form is held, perceived and reshaped. This is queer defamiliarisation” (Palmer 47).

Put differently, to characterise and categorise ellipsis and duration as such in the context of *Orlando* is correct in theory, but in practice their manifestation is utterly different from what their names suggest, as they function not as narrative devices in a universally applicable way, but as an autonomous locus of spatiotemporal re-interpretation of the protagonist’s embodied temporality. Their role is redefined by the narrative’s underlying queerness (both in terms of gender and temporality), which, when considered in structural analysis of the narrative, makes the interplay between narrative form and content (by virtue of gender) not only evident but also enriched in terms of interpretation. Therefore, the novel’s unnatural temporal structure and the protagonist’s queer identity are interconnected, with the narrative’s temporal organisation serving the specific thematic purpose of reflecting gender fluidity. Just as the unnatural temporality challenges real-world expectations of time and time’s passing, Orlando’s fluid gender defies heteronormative perceptions of gender.

Building on the first two non-sequential modes of temporality in the novel (isolation and reminiscence), the third and fourth ones are the acts of reading and writing literature. “For it is a difficult business – this time keeping”, states the narrator, as “nothing more quickly disorders it than contact with any of the arts” (Woolf, *Orlando* 211). When the protagonist engages with reading and writing, time passes differently—more quickly—as Orlando becomes so absorbed in his/her reading and writing practice that the seasons change unnoticed, yet without affecting Orlando’s physicality, as shown here:

Orlando had so ordered it that she was in an extremely happy position; she need neither fight her age, not submit to it; she was of it, yet remained herself. Now, therefore, she could write, and write she did. She wrote. She wrote. She wrote.

It was now November. After November, comes December. Then January, February, March, and April. After April comes May. June, July, August follow. Next is September. Then October, and so, behold, here we are back at November again, with a whole year accomplished. (184)

Additionally, writing serves more than just explaining the protagonist's extended lifespan due to the time elongation experienced while engaging with literature; it also functions as a seamless bridge between the present and the past, between the two halves of differently sexed history in the protagonist's life. Orlando shows no surprise at her physical transformation, which the narrator simply refers to as "the change" (83), as if nothing significant has altered. This lack of surprise is reflected in "The Oak Tree", his/her epic poem, where there is no indication that Orlando makes any noteworthy reference to her metamorphosis in her writing; the narrative of the poem continues uninterrupted, much like the protagonist's life. The combination of memory and writing reinforces this sense of safeguarded continuity, which extends, as I will discuss in this chapter, to the temporal continuum that the novel emphasises both thematically and structurally. This continuum, in turn, mirrors the constancy of the protagonist's gender and sense of self.

Both writing and the omission of memory loss not only preserve Orlando's recollections of the past but also validate the existence of the past itself. By omitting

erased recollections and using memory as a non-sequential form of personal (hi)story, the novel underscores the effortless continuity of the protagonist's identity, despite the fluidity that this identity entails. Thus, when the protagonist composes "The Oak Tree" by transcribing his/her recollections into a tangible work, he/she also creates a textual embodiment of both a personal and collective (hi)story—his/her own and England's—thereby giving body to time itself. Having begun her poem in 1586 and continued working on it until 1928, the protagonist shares an almost somatic relationship with her manuscript, carrying it with her across four centuries, two continents, and many of England's reigns, as evidenced by the manuscript's various stains.

Then Orlando felt in the bosom of her shirt as if for some locket or relic of lost affection, and drew out no such thing, but a roll of paper, sea-stained, blood-stained, travel-stained – the manuscript of her poem, 'The Oak Tree'. She had carried this about with her for so many years now, and in such hazardous circumstances, that many of the pages were stained, some were torn, while the straits she had been in for writing paper when with the gipsies, had forced her to overscore the margins and cross lines till the manuscript looked like a piece of darning most conscientiously carried out. (163)

In this context, temporality becomes somatic, inscribed on the body of the text just as it is encapsulated in the protagonist's body. In a similar light, the tracing of history through a textual surface is also evoked in the incident when Orlando holds Queen Mary's book of prayer and adds a small piece of tobacco to the already stained—by hair, blood and food crump—pages. As Elizabeth Freeman (2010) notes,

all stains are “connected to the body, which seems to variously shed, bleed, eat, and smoke a sedimented history that interests Orlando far more than the textual materials enclosing it” (109).

Yet, despite the various dimensions of transformation that the protagonist undergoes, Orlando contends that “after all [...] nothing has changed” (Woolf, *Orlando* 182). She identifies fluidity and movement within a continuum that, due to its inherently and continuously malleable and transitive nature, remains constant. This is also mirrored in the composition process of her epic poem, her “tribute to eternity” (182); her manuscript is under perpetual formation, eternally constructed while concurrently retaining its core identity, just like Orlando herself. Reflecting the modernist narrative principles of the time, Woolf envisions the self as fluid, rather than fixed, defining the malleability of identity through its relationship with the fluidity of temporality (namely, through “the discrepancy between time on the clock and time in the mind”). In doing so, she responds to traditional views of self-construction in literature and the life narrative genre.

As John Paul Riquelme notes, *Orlando* subverts the typical nineteenth-century Bildungsroman,²⁵ challenging the expectation that adult narratives must be “narratives of development”—where development is seen as a linear, unproblematic process (463). Then, much like how “The Oak Tree” serves as a bridge between the

²⁵ Roland Schleifer in his book *Modernism and Time: The Logic of Abundance in Literature, Science, and Culture, 1880-1930*, examines the shift from the nineteenth to the twentieth century across diverse disciplines, and its implications on the perception of time. He argues that the Enlightenment conception of time was homogeneous, universal, and aligned with the ideas of evolutionary progress and historicism, which view time as a linear sequence of events (2). Post-Enlightenment, “[t]hese classical perceptions of time [...] are called into question”, says Schleifer, “in the works of Benjamin, Virginia Woolf” and others, who “suggest a different arrangement of the relationship between past and present and different modes of representation from the hierarchical reductions of Enlightenment science [...]” (3).

protagonist's story and England's history, Woolf's novel acts—to adopt Riquelme's term—as a “form of bridging” (468), connecting the familiar (modernist writing conventions and common themes) with the unfamiliar and the new, through its nuanced sense of temporality and gendered identity.

In the following sections, I will explore how embodiment and temporality intertwine in the novel, as well as how they are narratively manifested throughout the narrative. Additionally, I will examine how Woolf further redefines the “narrative of development” (Riquelme 463), showing how the novel's temporal continuum mirrors the protagonist's evolving sense of self, incorporating both gender and time in a panoramic, rather than (gender-)binary or linear manner.

The Body as Time and Time as Body

The intersection between embodiment and temporality in Woolf's novel is initially foregrounded through the protagonist's connection to nature. Orlando's body seems to always respond to natural cycles, exhibiting a metaphysical bond with the natural world as if he/she embodies it. In fact, one of the introductory scenes of the novel features him lying under the oak tree, “feel[ing] the earth's spine” underneath him and “attach[ing] his floating heart” to the tree's hard roots (Woolf, *Orlando* 15). Suddenly, as if he starts magnetising them, elements of nature start reaching for his body; deer, clouds, leaves, rocks, swallows and dragonflies, all respond to him, “as if all the fertility and amorous activity of a summer's evening were woven web-like about his body” (15). This scene has evident erotic connotations in Orlando's interaction with nature (“the hard root of the oak tree”, “to feel the earth's spine beneath him”, “the heart filled with amorous gales”) as if his body exudes fertility in response to the

mating season during summer. Temporality serves as a significant locus of embodied eroticism, as Orlando seems to be aligned with the natural cycles of the season by means of his senses.

The interplay between queer temporality and the narrative representation of the senses has been examined in depth by Kate McCullough in her 2024 book *Never on Time, Always in Time: Narrative Form and the Queer Sensorium*,²⁶ who contends that “queer time in its most potent, palpable, and radical expression depends upon a rendering of the senses” (1). In *Orlando*, the protagonist’s relationship with nature is distinctly sensual in both senses of the word: it is both mediated through sensory experience and charged with eroticism. This sensual rendering of time serves a crucial narrative function—it enables the text to “narrate what otherwise seems to be non-narrativizable” (McCullough 1) and, also, unexplainable: the conceptualisation of the body as time, and time as body.

Orlando even turns to nature when she, disappointed from centuries of futilely pursuing love, states that she has “found [her] mate” in the moor and calls herself “nature’s bride”, “embrac[ing] [...] the grass as she lay folded in her cloak in the hollow by the pool” (Woolf, *Orlando* 170). Therefore, through the novel’s “queer sensorium”—a term coined by McCullough to describe the narrative representation of queer bodily experiences as felt through the senses, and their capacity to open up non-normative understandings of time, history, and identity (1-3)—Woolf reimagines an

²⁶ McCullough offers a narratological perspective to the narrative ramifications of queer inhabitation of time, particularly from the standpoint of queer narratology. Drawing on influential queer narrative theorists such as Kadji Amin, Teagan Bradway, Ramzi Fawan, Elizabeth Freeman and José Esteban Muñoz, while building on contextual narratologists like Susan Lanser and Robyn Warhol, McCullough underscores the critical value of queer narratology in “mov[ing] us from locating ‘queer’ as solely an identity found within the storyline to seeing ‘queer’ as a model of narrative structure” (203).

alternative queer life-world where the sexed yet genderless body inhabits time both *as* and *in* a continuum, mirroring the constant fluidity of both identity and temporality.

Another element that underscores the conceptualisation of the body as time and time as the body is what Freeman calls erotohistoriography, which designates the method that traces “a counterhistory of history itself - an antisystematic method that informs other, much later artistic productions travelling more explicitly under the sign of queer” (95).

Erotohistoriography admits that contact with historical materials can be precipitated by particular bodily dispositions, and that these connections may elicit bodily responses, even pleasurable ones, but are themselves a form of understanding. It sees the body as a method, and historical consciousness as something intimately involved with corporeal sensations. (95-96)

In the context of Woolf’s novel specifically, Freeman attends to the ways that historical transitions are rendered corporeal and, specifically, erotic sensations for the protagonist, designating the connection between the soma and the sexual pleasures that it derives from playing with history. Freeman first suggests that if the novel’s narrator is interpreted as a historiographer and, by extension, Orlando as the “figure for the past itself”, then history-writing becomes both an attempt to seduce the past and the “past’s erotic impact on the body itself” (105). As I discussed earlier, nature significantly affects Orlando’s body, causing it to respond to the cycles of nature, such as entering a state of fertility during the summertime. This results in the body becoming a locus that radiates vitality, attracting other species, while simultaneously being drawn to the natural elements itself. Freeman, through a similar lens, sheds light

on how the various sociopolitical climates across the four centuries in Orlando's (hi)story are literalised as weather conditions that influence bodily functions and evoke sensual experiences, "succinctly captured by the narrator's observation that 'one might see the spirit of the age blowing, not hot, now cold, upon [Orlando's] cheeks' (236)" (107).

At the same time, history and history writing are eroticised through the two distinct visual concepts of a finger touching the hole of a historical manuscript and a finger stitching a hole as metaphors for fingering and fingerplay, respectively, as Freeman notes. The lack of detailed information about Orlando's life and Dukedom in Constantinople is attributed by the narrator/historiographer to the poor condition of the documents from that time, particularly noting "a hole in the manuscript big enough to put your finger through" (Woolf, *Orlando* 84). In the same light, memory is portrayed as a "seamstress [that] [...] runs her needle in and out, up and down, hither and thither" (55).

Freeman reads "the hand that plies the needle, the needle that is itself a kind of finger penetrating the holes in memory and manuscript, the nerve system that controls the pen and yet is wrapped around the fibers of our whole being, [...] [as] figures for a more affective and embodied form of historical inquiry" (110). By imagining the proximity of finger and hole in both metaphorical images as a "tactile meeting" between present and past, namely, between the somatic body and the body of history, Freeman underscores the act of erotically touching history and of being touched back by it, thereby creating a form of foreplay (110). As a result, the narrative cultivates, through sensorial and sensual experience (particularly via the sensorium of

the touch), a queer mode of inhabiting time beyond the normative and chronological order (McCullough 10), namely, beyond what Woolf refers to as “the time on the clock”.

Another narrative instance that brings the protagonist’s embodied relationship to temporality to the front, framing Orlando’s metamorphosis, is the seven-day trance that precedes his transformation. For a week, “without perceptible breathing”, the protagonist ceases to show any signs of life, unable to wake up on the first morning and unresponsive to his staff’s attempts to wake him (Woolf, *Orlando* 48). Once naturally awakened on the eighth day, Orlando appears unaware of what has occurred, continuing with his day without any recollection of the past few days. This incident is repeated in the seven days leading to his transformation; the protagonist sleeps again for seven days straight and wakes up the eighth day as a woman. The connection between temporality and embodiment is implicitly drawn by the narrator when he says the following:

But if sleep it was, of what nature, we can scarcely refrain from asking, are such sleeps as these? [...] Has the finger of death to be laid on the tumult of life from time to time lest it rends us asunder? Are we so made that we have to take death in small doses daily or we could not go on with the business of living? [...] Had Orlando [...] died for a week, and then come to life again? And if so, of what nature is death and of what nature life? (48-49)

Orlando embodies death in the smallest amount possible, manifesting as a brief trance lasting only a few days, before awakening in his female body, beginning a second life. This natural cycle of death and rebirth is contained within the body, making the seven-

day trance a rite of passage—a ceremonial event in the protagonist’s life that designates his trans-formation (namely, the crossing between two different states of being) from male to female.

The in-between state of the trance with its encapsulated embodied temporality can be approached through Sara Ahmed’s standpoint in *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, where she reads “[s]uch moments when you “switch” dimensions” as “deeply disorientating” since “[o]ne moment does not follow another, as a sequence of spatial givens that unfolds as moments of time” (158). Contrarily, during those moments something is lost, “but the ‘loss’ itself is not empty or waiting; it is an object, thick with presence” (Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology* 158). In Orlando’s case, the loss of a former self is necessary for a new self to emerge; the impending new form is not evident during the trance, which can easily be interpreted as loss, even though it is actually “the making present of something that is now absent (the presence of an absence)” (Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology* 158). Viewed this way, the trance constitutes an embodied liminality—the threshold between the time that has passed and the time yet to come, encapsulated in the protagonist’s body, framing his imminent transformation.

Additionally, the novel highlights the conceptualisation of the body as time and vice versa through Orlando’s parallel relationship to the changing world across centuries. Orlando’s ageing is synchronous with the world’s development, in that not only does he age with the passage of time and the changing epochs, but he also matures alongside time and the maturing world itself; the somatic and the world’s body are intertwined, both traversing and embodying the various epochs across four

centuries. “[T]he terms of history become Orlando’s terms”, contends Sandra M. Gilbert in her introduction to the 2000 edition of the novel, “and finally,” she continues, “even history itself becomes Orlando’s story, the tale of the body now male, now female” (xxvii). Just as humans have continually adapted to the changing epochs of history, striving to keep pace with new innovations and needs, Orlando is “growing up”, “losing some illusions [...] perhaps to acquire others”, embodying an ongoing process of transition and adjustment (Woolf, *Orlando* 123). This process is shaped by the various manners and customs of the different historical moments he lives through, as well as the diverse places of the world he inhabits.

Yet still, for all her travels and adventures and profound thinkings and turnings this way and that, she was only in process of fabrication. What the future might bring, Heaven only knew. Change was incessant, and change perhaps would never cease. High battlements of thought, habits that had seemed durable as stone, went down like shadows at the touch of another mind and left a naked sky and fresh stars twinkling in it. (124)

Orlando not only experiences change during her metamorphosis but, more significantly, embodies change. Her perception towards her physical transformation, once the transformation takes place, is the embodiment of the passage above. The narrator states that “[t]he change of sex, though it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity”, and proceeds to add that “[t]he change seemed to have accomplished painlessly and completely and in such a way that Orlando herself showed no surprise at it” (98). Through her self-perception, Orlando proves that “change is incessant” (124) indeed, which turns change automatically into a constant.

Her transformation is seamless, mirroring the novel's fluid temporal logic, where time is so (constantly) malleable that its passage becomes natural and imperceptible both to the reader and the characters.

Towards the end of the novel, in the narrative present (namely, on the 11th of October 1928), Orlando is portrayed as emotionally charged, recalling her past adventures while travelling on her motorbike. "Time has passed over me", she thinks, adding that "nothing is any longer one thing" (210). Then, the narrator argues that "the most successful practitioners of the art of life [...] somehow contrive to synchronise the sixty or seventy different times which beat simultaneously in every normal human system so that when eleven [o'clock] strikes, all the rest chime in unison, and the present is neither a violent disruption nor completely forgotten in the past" (210-211). The protagonist, thus, embodies this synchronicity that enables her to experience life fully, being potentially one of those who "are hundreds of years old though they call themselves thirty-six", and ultimately proving that "[t]he true length of a person's life [...] is always a matter of dispute" (211).

Once again, the narrative foregrounds Woolf's notion of "the discrepancy between the time on the clock and the time in the mind", "the mind of man" and the "body of time" (68), this time positioning the protagonist at the heart of the concept, alluding to her embodied temporality as a way of experiencing and enjoying life fully. Lastly, in addition to Orlando herself, it can be argued that both the poet Nicholas Greene and the Russian Princess Sasha belong to a similar cast of individuals who immerse themselves in the complete enjoyment of life, as Orlando encounters both

again towards the end of the narrative, nearly three centuries after their initial meetings (192, 209).

Synchronic and Diachronic Approaches to Temporality

As I briefly mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, one of the ways that the novel's unique utilisation of temporality is realised is through the implicit, underlying simultaneous unfolding of two parallel timelines: the protagonist's and Vita Sackville-West's. It is widely known that Woolf wrote the novel for Vita and that she shaped the character of Orlando and his/her life based on her. Therefore, I argue that the narrative encompasses two intertwined biographies instead of just one: that of Woolf's character and the Sackvilles'.

In the edition I am currently using, edited by Sandra Gilbert (2000) for Penguin's Modern Classics Series, extensive material has been drawn from the letters between Woolf and Vita Sackville-West, as well as from Woolf's own diaries to trace the various connections between references in *Orlando* and their origins in Vita's and her family's real life. These connections are provided as notes at the end of the edition, creating a secondary "biography" that follows the fictional narrative. The notes include, of course, various other clarifications and additional information, rendering the series of references to Vita's life a type of non-linear and fractional memoir, mirroring the novel's non-conforming and fragmentary temporality, as if Vita exists in a continuum just like Orlando, penetrating the epochs with flexible constancy and constant flexibility.

The novel opens and, right away, in the first sentence, there is an implicit connection to Vita's father which is analysed by the editor in the book's notes; the

characterisation “Moor” alludes to the protagonist’s literary ancestor, the main character of Ariosto’s 1532 epic poem *Orlando Furioso*, who serves as the inspiration for Woolf’s *Orlando*. In fact, “the novel begins in 1553 when Thomas Sackville”, like the young nobleman, “would have been sixteen” (Woolf, *Orlando* 234). A few lines later, there is another covert reference to the “fields of asphodel” (11), a flower that resembles the lily and which Vita had actually encountered during her trip to Persia in 1926, while the image of the protagonist’s father immersed in “the northern mists wearing coronets on their heads” points to the Sackvilles, who used to go to Normandy in the ninth century (234).

The novel is full of references similar to these, creating a system of temporal relationships between the fictional character, Vita, and Vita’s family. The epic poem “The Oak Tree” is inspired by the oak tree under which Vita wrote in Knole Park and simultaneously hints at her famous poem “The Land”, as Gilbert notes (235). Orlando’s character and physicality are also shaped according to Vita; the protagonist is described as “handsome” with “shapely legs” (234) and is known for dressing sharply and driving fast—two traits stereotypically attributed to men rather than women (252). These descriptions reflect Woolf’s perception of Vita’s external appearance and mannerisms, as recorded in Woolf’s diaries and letters to her. Following that, the supposed photos of Orlando that depict her late 19th-century (111) and early 20th-century self (121), namely, after her transformation, are photos of Vita’s. All these instances of intersectional fictional and real-life temporalities underline further the embodied temporality that the narrative employs throughout; the sexed yet

genderless body is perceived not only *in* time but also *as* time, existing panoramically across time, and defying the rigid distinction between synchrony²⁷ and diachrony.²⁸

A synchronic approach to embodied temporality considers how temporality is experienced in the body at a moment in time without factoring its historicity into account, focusing on the ways that time and body come together in an intersection. A diachronic approach, on the other hand, considers how temporality is experienced in the body through time, examining the body's temporal journey. *Orlando* complicates this seemingly mutually exclusive relationship by virtue of creating a narrative of temporal embodiment that exists in a continuum while also shedding light on the individual moments in the protagonist's journey that shape his/her identity one moment at a time. Approaching the narrative in this light, I specifically argue that the conceptualisation of time across a continuum constitutes the narrative manifestation of the conceptualisation of the sexed yet genderless body that exists equally in a perpetual state of flux.

Firstly, to substantiate my argument, I will analyse how *Orlando* problematises the concept of temporality in terms of synchrony and diachrony, resulting in the formation of a temporal continuum or a panoramic narrative. Finally, I will show how this continuum mirrors Orlando's own relationship with his/her gender across the different stages of his/her transformation, drawing the connection between temporality and embodiment through the lens of transformation. In terms of the synchronic dimension of temporal embodiment, the narrative brings together—

²⁷ The word "synchrony" comes from the Greek prefix *syn-* (συν), meaning "together" or "with", and the noun *chronos* (χρόνος), meaning "time".

²⁸ The word "diachrony" comes from the Greek prefix *dia-* (δια), meaning "across", and the noun *chronos* (χρόνος), meaning "time".

through various means of non-sequential temporality, as I analysed earlier—different temporal layers that coexist synchronically in just a few sentences or even a single line. These temporal intersections between past, present and future, are formed due to the unique temporal logic of the novel that deviates from normative categorisations of temporal relations. The passage that follows is a typical example of the novel's time passing, where the diegetic time that unfolds in a few lines captures years of story time. However, due to the way that Orlando ages, we know that the elliptical phrase "year after year" in reality corresponds to a few minutes in Orlando's life. As a result, past, present and future succeed one another in a moment, synchronically meeting and intersecting in the protagonist's embodied temporality.

Thus, at the age of thirty, or thereabouts, this young Nobleman had not only had every experience that life has to offer, but had seen the worthlessness of them all. [...] Here he came then, day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year. He saw the beech trees turn golden and the young ferns unfurl; he saw the moon sickle and then circular; he saw – probably the reader can imagine the passage which should follow and how every tree and plant in the neighbourhood is described first green, then golden; how moons rise and suns set; how spring follows winter and autumn summer. (67)

This evokes once again Woolf's concept of "the discrepancy between the time on the clock and the time in the mind" as Orlando's disappointment with life and love compresses years ("time on the clock") into mere moments ("time in the mind") (68)—life seems so "worthless" that the passage of time appears insignificant and futile to Orlando, who allows years' worth of life to pass him by. The synchronic nature of this

scene lies in the coexistence of the past (“had not only had every experience that life has to offer, but had seen the worthlessness of them all”), the present (“at the age of thirty, or thereabouts”), and the future that quickly becomes past again (“how spring follows winter and autumn summer”) within a few moments. However, it is not merely synchrony but also an implicit diachrony that unfolds in the passage, complicating the two categories.

This is because of Orlando’s embodied relationship *with* time which is concurrently demonstrated *across* time; the natural cycles (the succession of seasons, the rising and setting of the sun, the phases of the moon etc.) underline the uninterrupted flowing of time—the continuum that Orlando exists in and, most significantly, embodies. In that regard, Orlando’s body in the passage is a vessel through which time relentlessly progresses and is also experienced. And even though the protagonist seems externally untouched by it, time bears upon him internally, evoking feelings of “worthlessness” and overall futility towards life. The more one looks at the novel from both a synchronic and diachronic standpoint, focusing on the ways that both categories are complicated by virtue of non-sequential modes of temporality, the more the protagonist’s embodied experience of time as a continuous, unfolding process is underscored.

Another narrative incident that brings the intersection of embodied synchrony and diachrony to the forefront is the narrator’s concept of the multiplicity of selves. Each person, the narrator argues, consists of many selves, “one on top of another, as plates are piled on a waiter’s hand”; these selves have “attachments elsewhere, sympathies, little constitutions and rights of their own”, and can be thousands of them

within one person (213). The protagonist, at the end of the novel, calls for a new self as she has been “sick to death of this particular self”, craving another (212). She desires to embody “the conscious self”, the “true self” (214), which encapsulates all other potential ones, past and future, and when she does, the narrative reads: “And she fell silent. For it is probable that when people talk aloud, the selves [...] are conscious of dis severment, and are trying to communicate, but when communication is established they fall silent” (216).

This narrative instance notably aligns with one of the novel’s most distinctive depictions of the concept of duration, specifically the relationship between diegetic/narrative time and story time. The novel concludes with “the twelfth stroke of midnight, Thursday, the eleventh of October, Nineteen Hundred and Twenty-Eight” (228), marking what the narrator refers to as “the narrative moment” (206)—the narrative present from which the story is said to unfold. The events that are entailed in just this one day in the story time extend to over twenty pages of diegetic time, resulting in a significant stretching of time’s passage. And even though, according to the narrator, there is “no time now for reflections” as the protagonist is “terribly late already” (206), the narrative goes into significant detail in describing what the present moment encloses, engendering a discrepancy between the time of events within the storyworld (one day) and the pseudo-time of arrangements of those events in the narrative (twenty pages).

This temporal imbalance becomes even more evident when one considers that the whole novel does not exceed 220 pages on average while capturing 20 years of Orlando’s life across 4 centuries. In this narrative instance of the present moment,

then, narrative time slows significantly down, drawing attention to the retrospective properties of ageing and the repletion of the real self that the protagonist finally assumes. Put differently, the elongation of the story time into diegetic time serves as the narrative manifestation of the notion that “[a]ll was phantom[,] [...] [a]ll was still” as the protagonist pauses to look back on her life and evaluate her journey towards the present moment (227). This internal “stillness”, this stasis, which is required in order for Orlando to immerse herself fully in the present moment and her sense of real, single self, is mirrored on the discourse level of the narrative as a “pause”, namely, what Genette describes as resistance on a point in time that does not move the plot forward (99).

This scene recalls themes found in Virginia Woolf’s narrative essay “Evening Over Sussex: Reflections in a Motor Car”, written fourteen years after *Orlando*. While the protagonists in both works are traveling—one on a motorbike, the other in a motor car—they both confront the complex notion of the self. In “Evening Over Sussex”, Woolf specifically centres this discussion around the concept of time and, specifically, time passing, as shown in the following passages:

But relinquish, I said (it is well known how in circumstances like these the self splits up and one self is eager and dissatisfied and the other stern and philosophical), relinquish these impossible aspirations (123).

But I, being somewhat different, sat aloof and melancholy. While [the selves] are thus busied, I said to myself: Gone, gone; over, over; past and done with, past and done with. I feel life left behind even as the road is left behind (124).

Now we have got to collect ourselves; we have got to be one self. [...] We are alone. Now is the time of reckoning (125).

“Off with you,” I said to my assembled selves. “Your work is done. I dismiss you” (126).

These extracts portray moments that echo similar narrative moments in *Orlando*, such as the “splitting” of the self into multiple ones, the desire for unity, the sense of life passing by, and the ultimate isolation sought for the realisation of the true self, all of which form the core of both texts by Woolf. However, in “Evening Over Sussex”, Woolf elaborates on these selves, emphasising their embodiment and perception of time. The first two selves seem the most demanding, striving to capture the fleetingness of each moment but ultimately accepting the passage of time and learning to appreciate beauty as it comes, moment by moment. The third self is depicted as aloof and melancholic (as glimpsed in the passage), mourning the death of each moment but still managing to appreciate beauty as it arises and fades. Finally, the fourth self projects the transient beauty onto the future, always eagerly anticipating what comes next and acquiring a positive behaviour towards time passing.

The layering of the selves, which potentially resemble those in the narrative essay, as discussed by the narrator in *Orlando* (213), illustrates an inherently diachronic approach to identity formation and embodied temporality, highlighting the amalgamation of different versions of oneself across time. However, when the narrator addresses how Orlando’s past selves converge to fulfil a new sense of the real self in the narrative present, it also invites a synchronic approach to identity formation and temporal embodiment by situating the protagonist’s embodiment of the past within

the present moment, thereby complicating the mere distinction between synchrony and diachrony, identity in time and identity across time. Therefore, just like time, which is conceived as a continuum in the novel, where synchronic and diachronic approaches coexist and are not mutually exclusive, the relationship to the protagonist's sexed yet genderless body exists in a continuum as well, illustrating how the form reflects the content and vice versa.

Identity as a Continuum

In this context, metamorphosis is embraced by Orlando without creating a distinct divide or a clear "before" and "after" in her consciousness or sense of identity, despite the dramatic physical transformation. As she reflects, "[t]he change of sex, though it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity" (Woolf, *Orlando* 98). Throughout the story, the protagonist is portrayed as "censuring both sexes equally, as if she belonged to neither," even after experiencing life as both sexes across centuries of history (113). Her relationship to identity remains genderless. This fluidity extends to Orlando's sexuality as well; following the transformation, she continues to be drawn to individuals of all genders, including those whose gender is ambiguous. For example, when Orlando first encounters Princess Natasha, the emphasis is placed on her "extraordinary seductiveness which issued from the whole person," making "the name of the sex" seem irrelevant (26).

Another incident in the story that reinforces the idea that transformation is approached within a continuum is the reaction (or rather lack thereof) of the protagonist's servants to her metamorphosis. "No one showed an instant's suspicion that Orlando was not the Orlando they had known. If any doubt there was in the human mind", the narrator continues, "the action of the deer and the dogs would

have been enough to dispel it, for the dumb creatures, as is well known, are far better judges both of identity and character than we are" (121). This aligns with the protagonist's own perception of self after the transformation takes place and the fact that even "she has scarcely given her sex a thought" (108). Finally, the narrative brings temporality and identity together, in one passage, towards the end of the novel, underlining the perpetual change and flexible constancy that this relationship entails.

She had been working on ["The Oak Tree"] for close on three hundred years. It was time to make an end. [...] Yet through all these changes she had remained, she reflected, fundamentally the same. She had the same brooding meditative temper, the same love for animals and nature, the same passion for the country and the seasons.

"After all," she thought, getting up and going to the window, "nothing has changed. The house, the garden are precisely as they were. Not a chair has been moved, a trinket sold. [...] True, Queen Victoria is on the throne and not Queen Elizabeth, but what difference..." (163)

As Nancy Cervetti argues in "In the Breeches, Petticoats, and Pleasure of Orlando" (1996), Woolf's text defies not only the attempt to assign its protagonist to a rigid category but more significantly defies the concept of a category per se, similar to the way that "[o]ver and over the text mocks its own pursuit of Orlando, its own attempt to pin him down, to know the biographical facts of her life and define her essential person" (175). Orlando, who is almost always described in one way or another as "flushed," "excited," yet "terribly late" as if always in a hurry (Woolf, *Orlando* 12), and who, much like "nature [...] has tricks of [his/]her own" (Woolf,

Orlando 13), constantly evades the narrator/historiographer's attempts to capture him/her. This way, the protagonist escapes both temporal constraints and rigid categorisation in terms of his/her gender, thereby rendering gender trouble as "a playful trouble that questions the possibility, the need, or the advantage of any stable notion of identity" (Cervetti 169). In this context, it could be argued that the novel's unnatural organisation of time also functions as a parody of biographical conventions—much as Alber suggests that such unnatural narratives often do with specific literary genres (183)—by deliberately subverting the idealised structure of biographies and the reader's expectations of them.

From a similar standpoint, Gabrielle McIntire (2008) argues that "Woolf extends her life-long critique of biography's spurious claims to objectivity" by writing a novel that "dared to inhabit and critique several genres at once as part of its strategy of writing out bisexual desire and Woolf's own particular history of love" (125). The conventional biographical temporality is, therefore, destabilised, exposing the constructed nature of narrative frameworks that attempt to represent transformation through rigid binary terms and oppositions. And in doing so, Woolf also "challenges the artificiality of confining a lifetime to its calendrical span as she maps a confluence of multiple temporalities *and* multiple identities, critiquing the Western cultural fallacy that consciousness is reducible to a discernible singularity framed neatly by diachronic time" (McIntire 127; italics in original).

Instead, the narrative establishes a temporal continuum where change and transformation are rendered a constant due to their perpetual fluidity. Gender, as an aspect of the protagonist's identity, is positioned within this continuum, making Orlando's metamorphosis a sexed yet genderless process across time. This aspect of

the novel's content is also reflected in the narrative form, where temporality, as a structural element, disrupts conventional categorisations in classical narratology and challenges binary distinctions of diegetic time, such as the diachronic and synchronic approaches to temporal narrative embodiment.

Moreover, the ongoing transformation and fluidity present in both the structural element of temporality (form) and the novel's theme (content) are not only seen as constants but also as something as natural and intrinsic as nature itself. Orlando's body does not conform to a conventional temporal logic; instead, it follows natural cycles, aligning with the elements of nature and suggesting that his/her queer body is an intrinsic part of nature itself. The same holds true for gender; the protagonist's bisexuality and gender-fluid identity, regardless of the sex he/she inhabits, are embraced by Orlando, the narrator, and other characters (as previously discussed) as if transformation exists within a continuum rather than a binary system that delineates a "before" and "after", a point of departure and arrival.

Similarly, the formal fluctuations in diegetic and story time are seamlessly integrated into the narrative logic, neither disrupting the reader's experience nor eliciting questions or disbelief regarding the novel's structure, mirroring gender's role in the process of narrative information and, ultimately, in rendering queer defamiliarisation (to circle back to Palmer) entirely natural. As Pooja Mittal Biswas beautifully notes in "Queering Time: The Temporal Body as Queer Chronotope in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*" (2020), "Orlando's internal continuity de-sequences the gender binary by creating a tautology between male and female, man and woman" according to which, in simple terms, "Orlando is Orlando regardless of being in a man's body or a woman's" (45). The same way that the protagonist "de-sequences" the

passage of time, he/she “de-sequences” gender, underscoring once again the contiguity and alignment between body and time.

Finally, to illustrate my argument on the unique manner in which temporality is manipulated in the novel to foreground the notion of identity and gender as a continuum, I will turn to what can be potentially considered the most influential concept on time in narrative theory: Mikhail Bakhtin’s chronotope. Although Biswas, as indicated by the title of her paper, has already advocated for a queering interpretation of *Orlando* through a chronotopic lens, analysing the protagonist’s body as a “queer chronotope” (Biswas 42), my use of Bakhtin serves a different purpose. By examining how the theme of metamorphosis has historically engaged with the narrative concept of temporality as outlined in Bakhtin's essay, I discuss how Woolf’s narrating of transformation diverges from its literary tradition and the impact of this deviation.

To begin with, Bakhtin (1981) uses the term “chronotope” to denote the intersection of the axes of space and time in literary narratives, with a particular emphasis on time, asserting that time is the primary category of the aforesaid chronotopic relationship in literature, as follows: “Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history” (84-85). After analysing the Greek Romance and the chronotopic theme of adventure time, Bakhtin turns to the second form of the ancient novel, where he discusses time in the context of metamorphosis. The motif of human transformation and identity, he argues, “is a mythological sheath for the idea of development – but one that unfolds not so much in a straight line as spasmodically, a line with “knots” in it, one that therefore constitutes a distinctive

type of *temporal sequence*" (113; italics in original). Temporality takes a sequential form, according to which the derivative elements that make up the sequence that leads to metamorphosis in Hesiod's works, for instance, "differ profoundly from one another[,] [b]ut amid all this diversity the unity of the theogonic process, of the historical process, of nature and of agriculture life is preserved" (Bakhtin 113).

In Woolf's novel, the concept of development neither involves a final goal nor is it portrayed as the protagonist's ethical culmination. Although Orlando's sex changes midway through the story, this does not signify an internal change. Instead, this idea of transformation, of perpetual movement and change, is presented as inherent to Orlando's identity *despite* her transformation. Put differently, metamorphosis does not precede development, in the sense that the former results in the latter, or does not necessarily entail it as development's "mythological sheath", but coexists *alongside* it.

As far as temporality is concerned, time is manifested as a series of both sequential (natural cycles) and non-sequential modes of time passing (reading and writing literature, reminiscence, isolation), where the temporal body is reflected in the somatic body and vice versa. However, much like in Hesiod's works, unity in *Orlando* is not achieved through the elimination of diversity, but rather through the preservation of perpetual change across time and history. This constant flux, due to its eternal nature, becomes a defining element in Woolf's context. Therefore, the Bakhtinian notion of unity evolves into the concept of a continuum within the novel, as movement and development take on a temporal significance.

Apart from Hesiod, Bakhtin discusses another seminal work on the same topic, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The episodes that are enclosed in Ovid's story constitute

autonomous tales of transformation, where “[t]ime breaks down into isolated, self-sufficient temporal segments that mechanically arrange themselves into no more than single sequences” which makes unity impossible (114). In *Orlando*, the various incidents that precede and follow her transformation, are interrelated and interdependent due to their mutual belonging in the same temporal panorama, as already discussed: each episode’s synchronic significance for the protagonist feeds into the diachronic significance of his/her story, creating a panoramic approach to his/her identity across time. The idea of a temporal panorama is further underlined by virtue of the past tense which is employed in the novel as a result of the convention of the retrospective nature of the narrative which stems from a narrative present.

Notably, when the narrator/biographer states, at the last twenty pages of the novel, that “[i]t **was** the eleventh of October[,] [i]t **was** 1928[,] [i]t **was** the **present** moment”, he creates an oxymoronic narrative instant by still narrating in the past tense while referring to “the present moment” (Woolf, *Orlando* 206; my emphasis). And in doing so, as is common in unnatural narratives, *Orlando* “question[s] the assumption that the borders between the past, the present, and the future are fixed and impenetrable” by “fusing chronological incompatibles” (Alber 165). The thematic purpose of this linguistic and visual proximity—of this “fusing”—between past and present is to illustrate, on the discourse level, the temporal panorama that the novel constructs both thematically and structurally.

According to Jessica Seidel (2024), who reads *Orlando* as a trans character, “asynchronous and ever-evolving” (2), the protagonist's non-normative progression toward the narrative's conclusion (which ironically also represents the “present moment”), both highlights and complicates the relationship between trans

subjectivity and time, while also challenging the conventional orientation toward heteronormative lifespans (19). This becomes, in fact, increasingly clear throughout Woolf's narrative, where the protagonist's experience of key life milestones outside the expected heteronormative timeline mirrors the experiences of trans individuals. Orlando, for instance, undergoes a temporary "death" in the middle of the novel, as a young adult, shedding her former identity and transitioning into a more fitting body. This transformation brings her a sense of completeness and the realisation of her "conscious" and "real self", as has already been discussed (Woolf, *Orlando* 214). And although this change altered Orlando's sex, it "did nothing whatever to alter their identity" (Woolf, *Orlando* 98), which emphasises the physical and not the mental aspect of this change.

Much like a trans person, Orlando experiences a form of "death" (a moment that traditionally signals the end of a cisgender person's life) right before beginning to truly live as her authentic self, embracing a new, fuller life that leads to her sense of fulfilment. Her marriage—a milestone typically significant for heterosexual couples—is also queer, as Marmaduke Shelmerdine is also gender-nonconforming, and Orlando had initially rejected the institution of marriage when proposed to by Archduke Harry as a younger woman. In conclusion, as Seidel notes, Orlando "resists the linear sequence of birth, aging, and death - or rather, past, present, and future - which her transgender subjectivity queers and merges into an asynchronous continuum [...] allowing for self-determined gender variance" (19-20).

Coming back to the linguistic and visual proximity between past and present in the novel's last scene, the fact that this oxymoron is located at the very end of the narrative amplifies the effect of the temporal panorama; it creates a sense of fluidity

and continuity between history and contemporariness, past and present, moving away from a sequential and linear conception of temporality and leaning into a complex and malleable understanding of it. It is almost as if the entire narrative is being told at once, with the entire (hi)story of Orlando encapsulated in this singular “present moment”. In this light, the past tense form “loses its natural deictic quality”, as Monika Fludernik (2003) puts it in her analysis of “Chronology, time, tense and experientiality in narrative”, as it challenges the normative assumption that the past tense mode is exclusively employed to retrospectively tell a story (123). Another way that this is amplified, is if we consider the nature of Woolf’s narrator/biographer, who can be described as a teller figure, namely, an overtly designated narrative agent who transmits the narrative information whose consciousness mediates the narrative. According to Fludernik,

[t]exts that have a prominent teller figure employ the preterit as a deictic signalling of pastness in relation to the time of the teller figure’s writing or speaking. Narratives in the reflector mode do not have a teller figure and therefore the past tense has no deictic anchoring in relation to an extradiegetic present. It is anchored in the consciousness of the reflector character, and in relation to this deictic centre it signals simultaneity. In reflector mode texts the preterite therefore has no deictic meaning of pastness. (“Chronology” 123)

However, the narrative in *Orlando* does not conform to the conventional utilisation of preterit of telling narratives. On the contrary, Woolf’s narrative in terms of how it manipulates temporality and tense resembles the second category, that of the reflector mode, in that the retrospective element of the story has, indeed, no clear “deictic of pastness” because of the panoramic approach to temporality which

foregrounds past and present simultaneously, as I discussed earlier regarding the oxymoronic instance of the “present moment” delivered in the past tense.

Lastly, coming back to Bakhtin (1981), the biggest deviation between his conception of metamorphosis and Woolf’s portrayal of it lies in the following passage:

Metamorphosis serves as the basis for a method of portraying the whole of an individual’s life in its more important moments of *crisis*: for showing *how an individual becomes other than he was*. We are offered various sharply different images of one and the same individual, images that are united in him as various epochs and stages in the course of his life. There is no evolution in the strict sense of the word; what we get, rather, is crisis and rebirth. (115; italics in original)

Orlando does not become “other than he was”; on the contrary, as has already been underscored many times so far, in the words of the narrator/historiographer, “[t]he change of sex, though it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity” (Woolf, *Orlando* 98). We observe Orlando across various epochs of both his/her life and the world’s history, following along just as the narrator/biographer endeavors to do, yet these “images” reflect external changes rather than indicating a progressively altered internal state.

The protagonist is indeed “reborn” in a way, an idea which is particularly reinforced through the second seven-day trance episode that alludes to the natural cycle of death and birth enclosed in Orlando’s body. Looked in this light, the seven-day trance becomes a rite of passage, a ritualistic event in the protagonist’s life that designates not merely her trans-formation (namely, the crossing between two

different states of being) from male to female, but more significantly her embodiment of time by virtue of not only undergoing a rite of passage but also embodying one.

This embodiment is “asynchronous and ever-evolving” (Seidel 2), rendering metamorphosis in Woolf’s narrative a process that is non-binary but continuous, an unbroken view of the whole “region” of Orlando’s life which mirrors her perception of her identity and gender. This is also reflected in the narrative form: diegetic time and story time shape one another; sequential modes of temporality are reconfigured into non-sequential, layered structures; the conventional passage of time is transformed into a queer temporality that destabilises classical narratological categories of narrative time; the temporal relationship to time materialises into a somatic relationship through sensorial metaphors and imagery. Woolf’s metamorphosis thus becomes a reconceptualised “basis for a method of portraying the whole of an individual’s life”—not, as Bakhtin suggests (115), “for showing how an individual becomes other than he was”, but rather for accounting for the constancy of incessant change, in which the queer subject takes shape.

Conclusions

The central thesis of this chapter has focused on the conceptualisation of time across a continuum as the narrative manifestation of the panoramic perception of the protagonist's identity. Woolf’s “unnatural” (Alber 168), queer temporality becomes what Fawaz calls an “enabling structure” that safeguards the “practice of continually coming into concrete being” (11)—as echoed by the narrator’s words that “[c]hange was incessant, and change perhaps would never cease” (Woolf, *Orlando* 124). By positioning temporal and gender fluidity at the core of the process of “taking shape”

(Fawaz 54), the narrative portrays internal metamorphosis as a malleable yet constant(ly) (formative) process within the novel, achieved through the temporal structuring of the narrative discourse.

Viewed through this lens, narrative form and content engage in a clear dialogic interplay, as the protagonist's queer identity is expressed through the specific ways in which narrative form is shaped—particularly in its handling of temporality and the various modes it adopts in the narrative. At the same time, incorporating gender into narrative analysis proves essential—not merely as contextual background, but as a narrative element with internal, intratextual functions. When these functions are examined in relation to temporality, especially through a contextual narratological framework, two things become apparent: first, narrative form emerges as a system of thematic and structural relationships, and, second, this perspective uncovers nuanced gendered and queer significations within the narrative that arise precisely by the connection between form and gender.

What emerges, then, is a non-(hetero)normative understanding of time, articulated through a mode of temporal “queer defamiliarisation” that renders time “stripped of its habit and its material form”—namely, its conventional narrative manifestation—and instead “ma[kes] it anew” (Palmer 47). By opposing—particularly through the “discrepancy between the time on the clock and the time in the mind” (Woolf, *Orlando* 68)—the normative categorisations of time established in classical narratology, and by challenging traditional conceptions of metamorphosis, chronotopic relations, and the mutually exclusive division between synchrony and diachrony, the narrative foregrounds queerness (in relation to both time and gender),

allowing it to materialise, take shape, and become somatic—without, however, losing its fluidity.

Chapter Two

“You are she. She is you.”: Identity Fragmentation through Perspective in *The Fifth Season* by N.K. Jemisin (2015)

Introduction

The second structural element whose analysis is pertinent in the context of transformation is perspective or, interchangeably, point of view. In comparison to the study of temporality, perspective comprises a substantially newer locus of narratological interest, as the first prolonged analysis of the concept was found in Henry James in 1908. James recognised perspective as a significant part of narrative method and processing, describing it in spatiovisual terms to designate a character’s core of consciousness (*Theory of Fiction*, 249). However, perspective’s connection to what is arguably narrative theory’s most studied and varied structural element, the narrator,²⁹ contributes to its diversity; notably, Plato’s extensive examination of “mimesis” and “diegesis”—a dichotomy which is also reflected in James’ respective notions of showing and telling—in the tenth book of *Republic* (299), introduces the concept of represented narrative, laying the foundation for the later conceptualisation of perspective.

²⁹ Among those who have theorised perspective is Gérard Genette, who differentiates it from the narratorial voice without presuming that a specific narratorial type (e.g. omniscient narrator) inherently and exclusively entails a particular viewpoint (e.g. third-person perspective) (187-188). This homogeneous approach has been critiqued by many influential narratologists, such as Monika Fludernik in “New Wine in Old Bottles? Voice, Focalization, and New Writing” as well as in “The Establishment of Internal Focalization in Old Pronominal Contexts”, who argues, for instance, that first-person narrators innately cannot acquire a zero point of view given their cognitive and spatiovisual positioning to a story and to the (other) characters. Burkhard Niederhoff explores the idea of a non-perspectival narrative, arguing that “[o]ne can tell a story without a fixed viewpoint in the literal sense, just as one can paint a landscape without perspective” (“Perspective – Point of View”, *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, Paragraph 35).

According to Burkhard Niederhoff, perspective (or point of view) “in narrative may be defined as the way the representation of the story is influenced by the position, personality and values of the narrator, the characters and, possibly, other, more hypothetical entities in the storyworld”.³⁰ The main factor that pertains to the complexity of the notion of perspective is the fact that it is a descriptor of a relationship. As Susan Lanser demonstrates in *The Narrative Act: Point of View in Prose Fiction* (1981), this narratological notion describes the relationship “between consciousness, discourse strategy, and aesthetic form[;] [i]t posits connections between narrative voice and the material, social, and psychological context of the writing act, connections between ideology and technique” (5). This multifaceted system of relations is based on speech act theory and a formalist study of narrative concepts, both textual and contextual, and it brings to the fore perspective’s interpretative possibilities as an extremely valuable tool for narrative and critical analysis.

In this chapter, I discuss the ways that the theme of metamorphosis (through a generic, psychological and environmental sense) is structurally realised in *The Fifth Season*—N.K. Jemisin’s first book in *The Broken Earth* trilogy—with an emphasis on perspective. The body of scholarship on Jemisin’s novel, though not yet extensive, naturally centres on the intersection of climate fiction, science fiction, and Black women’s studies. Two of the more recent contributions include MaryKate Messimer’s 2023 book-length study *Apocalyptic California: Gender in Climate Fiction*, and Jess A. Goldberg’s article, also published in 2023, titled “Living After, and Before, the End of

³⁰ Burkhard Niederhoff, “Perspective – Point of View”, *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, Paragraph 2.

the World: Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and N.K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth*". Messimer approaches the novel through the lenses of queer ecology, Black feminist theory, and ecofeminism, arguing that "the novel seeks utopia beyond reproductive futurity" and that it "consider[s] both the dystopian and the utopian possibilities of the American Dream, its history, and its future" (112). Goldberg, meanwhile, examines the novel's use of apocalyptic tropes, reading Jemisin's narrative "as much history as futurism," and contends that the text's "meditatio[n] on abolition and decolonization as [a] liberatory futur[e] demanded by the present World's violent conditions of possibility, take[s] up questions of violence as means for liberatory apocalypse" (187).

However, the scholarship of *The Fifth Season* has also started to ignite narrative theorists' and narratologists' interest in the novel's unconventional narration and narrative form, opening new possibilities for a formalist engagement with Jemisin's work. Specifically, the second-person narrative has become a particular focus of narratological enquiry, as situated in Monika Mishra's "Second-Person Narration and Self-Reflectivity: The Effectivity of the Narrative Technique in Empathizing with and Identifying the "Other" in N.K. Jemisin's *The Broken Earth* (2015-17) Trilogy" (2024) and in Kim Wickham's "Identity, Memory, Slavery: Second-Person Narration in N. K. Jemisin's *The Broken Earth* Trilogy" (2019). Drawing from Linda Hutcheon and her influential *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox*, Mishra interprets the second-person narration through the lens of postmodernism and, specifically, self-reflectivity, to discuss how the "you" creates its own subjectivity while also "works as a facilitator that eases the process of identification and empathy pf the readers with Essun" (3). Wickham, from a similarly narratological lens yet with a slightly different focus, examines the second-person mode in relation to Black identity formation,

arguing that “the second-person narration becomes indispensable for the reader to experience the connections between identity, memory, and community and to ultimately understand the need to acknowledge the traumas of the past as a step toward forging a more hopeful future” (393).

My approach to *The Fifth Season* in this chapter builds upon the arguments presented by both Mishra and Wickham, while also offering a distinct contribution to the existing narratological discussions. Specifically, I employ a contextual, feminist narratological standpoint to examine how perspective intersects with gender through the lens of Black motherhood, highlighting the dialogic relationship between structural and thematic transformation. I argue that motherhood is not only central to the narrative’s major themes but also deeply entwined with its structures, particularly perspective. In doing so, I aim to highlight the significance of analysing form through a gender-conscious lens, while also emphasising the importance of approaching gender with a framework that is both formalist and contextual—one capable of capturing the complexity of narratives centred on transformation, such as Jemisin’s.

Specifically, my central argument is that the second-person perspective serves as the narrative manifestation of the thematic dichotomy in identity between the protagonist’s past and present self, pre- and post-slavery-related trauma living—capturing her psychological transformation. To elucidate this, I approach the novel as a postmodern slave narrative and illustrate how Jemisin transforms the original slave narrative form to align with current racial and political sensitivities. I argue that departing from the first-person, autobiographical mode of traditional narratives—which sought to evoke the sympathy of white readers—shifts the focus away from the

white audience and recentres it on the Black experience. The implied unison of the narratee and the reader in the second-person mode is read as an ideological and formal joint re-action against the oppressive system within and beyond the storyworld; the second-person perspective “activates” a unique form of mimesis, establishing a connection between the narratee and the reader on the basis of narrative representation.

Moreover, I draw on Jennifer C. Nash (2018, 2021) to explore how Jemisin complicates representations of Black motherhood, arguing that—unlike Katharyn Privett (2007) and Dorothy Roberts (1999), who interpret the Black maternal body as dystopic (Privett 258)—Jemisin instead reimagines and resignifies motherhood as a site of resilience within dystopia. By examining the narrative function of the second-person mode in relation to storytelling and memory, I propose that the novel reinterprets the “maternal” narrative voice often found in Diaspora literature—one that enables the transmission of ancestral history from Black mothers to their children.

Additionally, I draw from key texts such as Toni Morrison’s “The Site of Memory” (1995), Ashraf Rushdy’s *Neo-slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form* (1999), and Timothy Spaulding’s *Re-forming the Past: History, the Fantastic, and the Postmodern Slave Narrative* (2005) to illustrate the ways Jemisin’s novel conceptualises yet also further lends complexity to significant themes related to neo-slave narratives (such as memory, breeding eugenics and renaming of the enslaved people). To discuss the environmental implications of the novel, in conjunction with the genre of science fiction, I draw from Chris Pak’s *Terraforming: Ecopolitical Transformations and Environmentalism in Science Fiction* (2016). Finally, I

demonstrate that the second-person mode engenders the concept of the Other in various ways, highlighting the complex relationship between humans and non-humans—two categories that the novel further problematises through its postmodern take on slave and environmental narratives.

Metamorphosis and Genre

The Fifth Season is a tale of several transformations. It explores political transitions such as the rise and fall of power structures, as well as the transmutation of violence. It also touches upon environmental transformation, including climate and geological change, and environmental ethics. Lastly, it delves into individual and collective transitions by examining societal and individual adaptability, as well as perseverance. Gender plays a significant role in the novel and is intricately woven into the narrative as motherhood is featured in the story as one of its central themes; the protagonist, Essun, is a mother who discovers that her husband has killed their son and has fled their home with their daughter. Essun's identity as a mother becomes a driving force for her actions and is the catalyst that sets the story in motion, as she departs to find her daughter, Nassun. Her journey becomes a commentary on the intersectionality between gender, power and motherhood, and signifies the reconstruction of her fragmented identity. In examining the above system of relationships, I intend to discuss how Black motherhood is approached in the novel, focusing on the intersection between Blackness and motherhood in the constitution of Essun's identity.

As far as the novel's plot and structure are concerned, the world of *The Fifth Season* (and, by extension, *The Broken Earth* trilogy) is set on a planet which

constitutes a supercontinent called the Stillness. The sociopolitical structure of the Stillness is comprised of different casts, or “comms”. One of those casts is the Orogenes, the people who can master Orogey, namely, the “ability to manipulate thermal, kinetic, and related forms of energy to address seismic events” (Jemisin 301). Orogey in itself is an illegal craft, only legally permitted “under strict organizational rules and with [...] close supervision” by Fulcrum, “the paramilitary order” of Stillness (300). *The Fifth Season* has eighteen chapters, including the prologue. Out of these chapters, eight are narrated in the second-person perspective; the corresponding chapter titles start with “you”, such as “1: you, at the end”, “3: you're on your way”, and “10: you walk beside the beast”.

The narrator of those sections remains unknown to the reader for the entirety of the text and is only revealed in the last two books of the trilogy, designating that the narrative voice belongs to one of the marginal characters of *The Fifth Season*—Hoa—a young boy who joins Essun (the protagonist and narratee) in her quest to find her daughter. The book's remaining ten chapters are narrated by a third-person narrator, with six of them focusing on Syenite, a young Orogene woman who embarks on a journey with her mentor, Alabaster, and four on Damaya, a little Orogene girl who is taken away from her hometown to receive imperial training. The chapter titles, which correspond to each of the two female characters, include the characters' names depending on whom the specific section focuses on. The three different perspectives are alternating in the novel, as the chapters do not follow a linear narration, but rather Essun, Syenite and Damaya's stories are interspersed. By the time that all three storylines have adequately developed, the truth is unveiled to the reader halfway

through the book; namely, that Essun, Syenite and Damaya are the same person in different epochs of their life.

By considering metamorphosis as a significant alteration in shape, configuration, or disposition, we can discern this principle in the substantial transition of the form of the traditional slave narratives to Jemisin's (and others') reconceptualisation of the genre. The foregrounding of a story of post-slavery trauma under the generic frame of science fiction, calls attention to the changing of form from realism to genre fiction, which also mirrors the potential change in readership. Jemisin does not simply revise the same frame of realism as many neo-slave narratives do, but rather introduces a completely different world-building under a unique sociopolitical structure of which slavery is still very much a part. In that regard, the slave narrative form is "metamorphosing" into a neo-slave narrative through the frame of science fiction, resulting in a retelling of slavery by means of rejecting the conventionality of realism. The impetus for this changing of shape, of form, is African American postmodernism, as A. Timothy Spaulding argues in *Re-forming the Past: History, the Fantastic, and the Postmodern Slave Narrative*:

Writers of postmodern slave narratives view the history of slavery as in need of *re-formation*. In sociopolitical terms, these writers set out to reform our conception of American slavery by depicting a more complex, nuanced view of Black identity in the context of American slavery. In aesthetic terms, they seek to create a new narrative form through which to reveal the complexities embedded within the slave experience and obscured by traditional historical accounts. [...] Like its eighteenth- and nineteenth-century counterpart, the

postmodern slave narrative represents a political act of narration designed to reshape our view of slavery and its impact on our cultural condition. It is designed to intrude upon history as a means to re-form it. (4; italics in original)

The most profound divergence between *The Fifth Season* and the original slave and neo-slave narratives is the alleviation of the historical context of African American enslavement. Unlike traditional slave narratives, which typically adhere to realistic portrayals of historical events and social conditions, Jemisin's novel incorporates imaginative elements such as magic, geological cataclysms, and otherworldly creatures to build a futuristic world through the lens of speculative fiction. Detached from historical representation yet focused on the reimagination and reformation of a sociopolitical system that fosters slavery-related practices and ultimately fuels the transmutation of violence, *The Fifth Season* is able to illustrate the legacy of slavery without the verisimilitude that is entailed in historical accounts even through fictional and non-mimetic frames, like 1979's *Kindred* by Octavia Butler or 1987's *Beloved* by Toni Morrison. Even though Butler's and Morrison's novels employ elements of gothic and science fiction respectively, resulting in an important re-shaping and re-signification of those generic characterisations, both of them are still grounded in the historical context of the enslavement of African American people.

The re-formation of the slave narrative form through genre fiction can also be connected to the different types of readership that each genre engages with. According to Spaulding, the original slave narratives' white readership was drawn to sensational and sentimental elements, aligning with the popular tastes of the time; while the narratives included fictional devices that catered to the romanticised

perceptions of slavery prevalent among some readers, Spaulding suggests that these elements were not solely crafted to appeal to a mass audience (11). Instead, they served a dual purpose: engaging readers through sensationalism while also aiming to persuade them of the narrator's experiences and viewpoints (Spaulding 11). This point implies that early African American writers adeptly navigated the preferences of their white readership, which tended towards sentimentalised portrayals of slavery, in order to effectively convey their messages. Therefore, the postmodern use of fictional and non-realistic elements "finds a precursor in the original slave narratives. Rather than manipulating the conventions of the sentimental novel, however, postmodern slave narratives mine the conventions of science fiction, fantasy, and the postmodern novel to appeal to contemporary sensibilities" (Spaulding 11).

Toni Morrison has also underlined the impact of the sentimental novel in the construction of slave narratives of the time, while also noting that "the popular taste discouraged the writers from dwelling too long or too carefully on the more sordid details of their experience" ("Site" 90). Black authors often avoided describing the full extent of the horrors of slavery for the sake of the white readers who could not relate and, thus, presented slavery in a more digestible way for those who could potentially have an impact on slavery abolition. For instance, in his memoirs, Frederick Douglass often glosses over particularly brutal incidents by redirecting the reader's attention from their graphic details to less violent scenes, as shown here: "But let us now leave the rough usage of the field, where vulgar coarseness and brutal cruelty flourished as rank as weeds in the tropics and where a vile wretch, in the shape of a man, rides, walks and struts about, with whip in hand, dealing heavy blows and leaving deep

gashes on the flesh of men and women, and turn our attention to the less repulsive slave life as it existed in the home of my childhood" (*Life and Times* 61).

In addition to the generic shift from the conventional slave narrative form to Jemisin's postmodernist portrayal of African American slavery, her novel diverges from the traditional slave narrative structure by eschewing the use of conventionally autobiographical first-person narrative. In most original slave narratives, the narrative "I" is employed in a dual manner; to shed light on the brutalities of slavery, rendering the narratee, the extratextual (white) reader, a potential ally to the abolition of slavery, and to engender a new, post-slavery and post-freedom sense of selfhood. In this context, the slave narrative not only served as a vehicle for documenting the firsthand experiences of formerly enslaved individuals but also played a pivotal role in shaping and affirming the reconfigured identity of Black subjectivity as emancipated individuals. This point is also echoed by Spaulding, who argues that "[t]he slave narrative is both an expression of the emergent sense of selfhood and a moral indictment of an American culture that has systematically oppressed that self" (9). In *The Fifth Season*, however, this reconfiguration of Black identity is rendered possible not through the narrative relationship between "the 'I' of the *bios* and the 'I' of the *graph*, the past self written and the present self writing" (Prosser 102; italics in original) but through the second-person narrative.

Essun acquires her identity (back) by virtue of being the narratee of the story of which she is also the protagonist: "You think, maybe, you need to be someone else. You're not sure who. Previous yous have been stronger and colder, or warmer and weaker; either set of qualities is better suited to getting you through the mess you're

in. Right now you are cold and weak, and that helps no one” (Jemisin 172). Resembling an (intratextual) biography, the narrative in the chapters on Essun’s timeline adopts a tone akin to that of a firsthand account composed by a close associate of the individual whose life is under scrutiny. But the receiver of this particular account is meant to be the same subject whose life story (and, by extension, identity) is being constructed. Consequently, the second-person mode becomes the intermediate lens through which pre-slavery and post-slavery Essun are being reconciled, thereby engendering a new identity of the Black protagonist in the process of the fictional narrating.

Jemisin's employment of the second-person narrative mode, in a manner that emphasises her protagonist's profound struggles against systems of oppression, brings to the forefront issues relevant to minority groups, especially African Americans in the wake of the history of transatlantic slavery, and highlights the silencing that encompasses many marginalised and suppressed subjectivities. This withholding of voice could be seen as antithetical to the neo-slave narratives that sustain a strong first-person mode throughout while also still employing second-person elements like the evocation to the reader. Toni Morrison notes that the print origins of Black literature were slave narratives, suggesting that a very large part of her own literary heritage resides in autobiography:

Whatever the style and circumstances of these narratives, they were written to say principally two things. One: “This is my historical life - my singular, special example that is personal, but that also represents the race”. Two: I write this text to persuade other people -you, the reader, who is probably not black- that we are human beings worthy of God's grace and the immediate

abandonment of slavery". With these two missions in mind, the narratives were clearly pointed. ("Site" 86)

The utilisation of the second person by Black authors of original slave narratives served the purpose of educating the reader about slavery through their autobiographical stories about violence, hardships and perseverance, while also according importance to the (white) reader's position in challenging and alleviating slavery. For instance, Harriet Jacobs in her memoir *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, directly appeals to the reader, as follows:

O, what days and nights of fear and sorrow that man caused me! Reader, it is not to awaken sympathy for myself that I am telling you truthfully what I suffered in slavery. I do it to kindle a flame of compassion in your hearts for my sisters who are still in bondage, suffering as I once suffered. (30)

Pity me, and pardon me, O virtuous reader! You never knew what it is to be a slave; [...] you never shuddered at the sound of [a tyrant's] footsteps, and trembled within hearing of his voice. (52)

Jemisin's novel does not employ the first-person in the same manner that traditional slave narratives do, in the sense that it does not maintain a perspective fixed on the autobiographical subject or use the second-person merely as an evocation of the reader, as illustrated in the two passages cited above. Rather, *The Fifth Season* renders the second-person one of the novel's two main narrative perspectives (along with the third-person that is employed in the chapters which focus on Damaya and Syenite), subverting the former authority of the reader as the receiver of the narrative and

emphasising the complexity of identity formation that trauma entails for the Black protagonist, as I will extensively discuss later in this chapter.

Neo-Slave Narrative Themes

The novel begins with the prologue's subtitle "**you** are here" and then the narrative reads: "Let's start with the end of the world, why don't **we**? Get it over with and move on to more interesting things. First, a personal ending. There is a thing **she** will think over and over in the days to come, as she imagines how **her** son died and tries to make sense of something so innately senseless" (Jemisin 1; my emphasis). From the outset, the narrative voice employs three distinct pronouns: second-person singular, first-person plural, and third-person singular. However, none of these pronouns offers additional details about the subjects to whom they refer. The use of "you" suggests a potential inclusion of the reader or a(nother) character as the narratee, while "we" implies a similar inclusivity with the narrator (the implied "I") included. Meanwhile, the female character mentioned remains unidentified, with no further elucidation provided regarding her identity.

As the chapter unfolds, the narrative voice becomes increasingly prominent yet fails to offer any additional insights into their status. Instead, the narrator elucidates to the narratee the workings of the world, embodied by the concept of the Stillness, and eventually focuses on two conversing figures: a man and his companion. Despite this focus, the narrator refrains from divulging any information about these characters, the identity of whom is revealed only at the end of the trilogy. Finally, at the conclusion of the prologue, the narrator initiates the tale of the woman with the dead child, establishing a connection between her and the narratee, as follows: "The

woman I mentioned, whose son is dead. She was not in Yumenes, thankfully, or this would be a very short tale. And you would not exist. [...] Her name is Essun" (9-10).

The beginning of the next chapter, namely, "you, at the end", makes the aforementioned relationship straightforward: "You are she. She is you. You are Essun. Remember? The woman whose son is dead" (15). What is made clear here is that Essun is both the narratee ("you") and the story's protagonist ("she"), as the narrator both talks to and about her. Magdalena Rembowska-Płuciennik (2018) in her article "Second-person Narration as a Joint Action" argues that "a particular form of participatory collective cooperation" distinguishes the second-person narrative from other types of narration, rendering it "as inherently interpersonal, and as social in nature" (163). This distinction is of great importance here, as it highlights the novel's sociopolitical awareness by creating a collective entity (entailed in "you") which is comprised of three separate narrative entities: the narratee/Essun, the narrator and the reader.

The narratee and the narrator inevitably make what Rembowska-Płuciennik calls "the cognitive 'me-and-you' dyad" that safeguards the existence of both the narratee and the narrator by virtue of the act of the second-person narration (165). On one hand, Essun's story is told only because the unknown narrator exists in the same narrative universe and, on the other hand, the narrator can be a part of Essun's tale because they must narrate it in order for the storyline to make sense. But what stands out as more interesting in the case of the second-person mode in Jemisin's novel is the implied inclusion of the reader in the traumatic life of Essun and more significantly in the sociopolitical injustices in *The Fifth Season*, which replicate the

systemic injustices against a marginal group of people. The reader's implied inclusion becomes apparent upon reading the novel's dedication: "For all those who have to fight for the respect that everyone else is given without question". Hence, Jemisin's readership responds to the social nature of her narrative by participating in the acknowledgement of the ongoing inequality among marginalised individuals.

Further, the second-person mode in Jemisin's novel is equivalent to what Monika Fludernik in "Introduction: Second-Person Narrative and Related Issues" (1994) identifies as a "narrative whose (main) protagonist is referred to by means of an address pronoun [...] and also ha[s] an explicit communicative level on which a narrator (speaker) tells the story of the 'you' to [...] the 'you' protagonist's present-day absent or dead, wiser, self" (288). In this way, "[t]he narrative projects an addressee by means of the second-person pronoun, and [the] speech act of address evolves into a narration of the 'you's' past experiences", thereby allowing Essun to "acquir[e] a fictional past through the narrative in progress" (Fludernik, "Introduction: Second-Person" 288). And it is through this unfolding narrative, that Essun is compelled to relive past traumas despite encountering them for the first time.

Although there are no traces in the narrative of Essun's reaction to the recounting of her life due to the unique way that the second-person perspective is employed in the text (with Essun's internal focalisation which is enabled by the narrator), the second-person mode serves to engage the reader's response to the protagonist's past revelations, establishing a relational continuity between the actual reader and Essun (the narratee). In this dynamic, both entities (fictional/narratee and extratextual/reader) assume the role of information recipients previously unaware of

the unfolding narrative, thereby creating what Brian Richardson (1988) regards in “The Poetics and Politics of Second Person Narration” as a “new possibilit[y] of mimesis”:

Second-person narration offers new possibilities of mimesis, particularly for revealing a mind in flux. [...] It invites a rewriting of commercial discourses intended to exploit their readers through the illusion of identification, it helps dramatize the mental battles of an individual struggling against the internalized discourse of an oppressive authority, and it is a useful vehicle for minority writers to foreground a subjectivity typically excluded from common, unexamined notions of “you” and “us”. (327)

Mimesis is developed between Essun (the narratee who “listens”, not the protagonist who experiences) and the reader, as the latter represents and assumes what Essun’s reactive position would be as she is told the narrative in progress. In that regard, the narratee and the reader are equal and are united under the second-person narration, forming—to echo and build on Rembowska-Płuciennik’s notion of “joint action”—a joint re-action (160).

This notion of joint re-action between the narratee and the reader, which is rendered possible by virtue of the second-person mode, is tightly connected to the novel’s neo-slave themes. Several aspects of *The Broken Earth* trilogy align with characteristics commonly found in a neo-slave novel, namely, in the words of Ashraf Rushdy in his seminal work *Neo-slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form* (1999), a “contemporary narrativity of slavery” which appertains to the conventions and the voice of the “antebellum slave narrative” (9). Even though the second-person interpellation was prominent in the 19th-century slave narratives to

form a dialogue between narrator and reader, as Jesse A. Goldberg (2017) highlights, the neo-slave narratives—and, as I argue, *The Fifth Season* as well—complicate this narrative technique further, and deviate from the “conventions of the sentimental novel, turning instead to the postmodern and/or anti-realistic narrative conventions to grapple with slavery” (61). The reader in Jemisin’s novel is invited to join Essun in her quest to unravel the fragments of her identity and to reconstruct her personal history through the analeptic narration by the unknown, unreliable narrator, who enfolds the reader into a collective unconscious. The narrative's unreliable nature adds a layer of complexity to this task and challenges the reader to decipher the intricate web of events that shaped Essun's life and to understand the traumas that ruptured her sense of self and brought her to the present moment.

Those traumatic repressed memories are closely tied to slavery, as the Orogenes, who have the ability to manipulate different types of energy to address seismic events, are always at risk of being controlled by the Imperial governance system in the Stillness, if found out. When Orogenes are discovered, they are either killed by the imperial forces, by other humans or taken away by the Fulcrum to be trained by Guardians and utilized for their Orogeny: “Orogenes have no right to say no. I am your Guardian. I will break every bone in your hand, every bone in your body, if I deem it necessary to make the world safe from you” (Jemisin 99). In the pursuit of “safety”, Orogenes undergo separation from their familial units and are taken away by Guardians, who facilitate their enrollment as Imperial Orogenes and their structured training as such. The initial phase of their transition from Orogenes to Imperial Orogenes entails the shedding of their ancestral communal name and acquiring a newly designated one, symbolising their disengagement from prior community ties

and their integration into the Fulcrum's fold, as I will discuss later in the chapter. Therefore, young Damaya is soon named Syenite, designating the transition between her former and current life.

Another sociopolitical aspect that echoes the practices of the enslavement of African Americans in *The Fifth Season* is the breeding eugenics that govern the Fulcrum. As is alluded to at the beginning of the novel concerning a character that is later revealed to be Alabaster, one of the main characters of the trilogy and a key figure for Essun's life, powerful Orogenes are "bred [...] through generations of rape and coercion and highly unnatural selection" (6). This system is also reflected in the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, where Douglass reveals that he never knew his father, a white man rumoured to be his own enslaver—a situation shaped by the law stating that all children born to enslaved women inherit their mother's status. Douglass writes that this system served to satisfy the desires of slaveholders while also making their exploitation profitable, "for by this cunning arrangement, the slaveholder, in cases not a few, sustains to his slaves the double relation of master and father" (*Narrative of the Life* 4).

As John W. Blassingame analyses in his influential *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (1972), the practice of the enslaved not having a choice over their marriage and mating partner "placed all of the slave's interests under the control of the master and gave the slave fewer excuses to leave the estate" (86). This coercive practice not only engendered a profound sense of powerlessness among the enslaved but also occasioned scenarios wherein masters compelled them to engage in conjugal relationships with alternative partners following the sale of their

spouses. Consequently, many enslaved individuals opted to escape from bondage in a quest to reunite with their loved ones rather than submit to the dictates of their enslavers (Blasingame 87).

Alabaster is introduced in the same chapter as Syenite, in the episode where Syenite visits him in the pursuit of her assignment to “*produce a child within a year with this man*” (Jemisin 69; italics in original). As one of the most powerful Orogenes of her age, she is compelled to reproduce her kind. If she doesn’t do as expected, “they will kill her career and assign her permanently to the Fulcrum, leaving her nothing to do but lie on her back and turn men’s grunting and farting into babies. She’ll be lucky to have only six if that’s how things turn out” (71). The main difference between Alabaster and Syenite in terms of their roots is that he is “domesticated purebred” while she is a “feral” (72), as she was born in a household of and by regular humans (or “Stills”, as they are called in the trilogy). Her coming from unpredictable circumstances instead of being “bred to order” like him (72) designates the lack of mastery of orogenic breeding on behalf of Fulcrum as she’s “proof that they’ll never understand orogeny; it’s not science, it’s something else. And they’ll never control us, not really. Not completely” (72). Her reproductive duties are tightly linked to her freedom, and her freedom is dependent on her submission and controlled nature, on how “*civilized*” she is, “for the ostensible good of all” (Jemisin 75; italics in original).

Reducing Syenite to her reproductive abilities is not only dehumanising but additionally symbolises the detachment from her gender and sense of womanhood, as both of these are closely related to motherhood or lack thereof. One of the most significant scenes of the *Broken Earth* trilogy that advances that theme is Syenite’s

decision to kill her and Alabaster's son. As per Jemisin's own account,³¹ the genesis of that particular episode finds its origins in the narrative of Margaret Garner, an African-American woman during the antebellum era who tragically took the life of her own daughter to shield her from the horrors of enslavement. Garner, whose story famously inspired Toni Morrison's *Beloved* too, together with her husband and their three children, joined other enslaved families in their quest for freedom while she was pregnant with their fourth child.

Subsequently apprehended by slave hunters, Garner, faced with the prospect of her children enduring the brutality of enslavement once more, made the agonising decision to end the life of her two-year-old daughter and attempted to do the same to her other two children. As both Blassingame and Douglass emphasise, "the most brutal aspect of slavery was the separation of families" (Blassingame 89), as enslaved mothers were often separated from their children as early as the child's first year—a reality Douglass himself experienced—in an effort to "hinder the development of the child's affection towards its mother, and to blunt and destroy the natural affection of the mother for the child" (*Narrative of the Life* 2). In a similar context, motherhood emerges as Essun's central motivating factor in navigating the traumatic experiences that ultimately contribute to her fragmented identity.

Unveiling the Second-Person Mode; Identity Fragmentation

The theme of Essun's fragmented identity is narratively manifested through the manipulation of second-person narration. To determine the status of the second-

³¹ Interview with Jason Kehe, "Fantasy Writer N.K. Jemisin on the Weird Dreams That Fuel Her Stories", WIRED Book Club.

person narration, I am looking at the tripartite relationship between the narrator (narrative voice, the agent who “speaks”), protagonist (focalisor, the agent who “sees”) and the narratee (the intradiegetic receiver of the narrative). While the communicative level between the narrator and the narratee remains implicit in the first novel, gradually unveiling the narrator's identity and the purpose behind the retrospective second-person narrative towards the conclusion of the third book, it becomes discernible to readers early on in *The Fifth Season* that: a) the narrator likely assumes a role within the story that they narrate, evident from their intimate knowledge of Essun, and b) Essun's need for a recounting of the events shaping her life suggests a significant underlying motive.

In exploring the above triad, I draw from Matt DelConte's model in “Why You Can't Speak: Second-Person Narration, Voice, and a New Model for Understanding” (2003), in which narrator, protagonist and narratee are approached not through the sole lens of narrative voice, but in the basis of the narrative transmission that is realised through the coincidence (or lack thereof) between the three aforementioned functions. According to DelConte's typology, the second-person narrative in *The Fifth Season* should be characterised as non-coincident narration, as the narrator, protagonist and narratee functions are all distinct (210). Put differently, all three narrative “positions” are “inhabited” by three distinct fictional agents, none of which coincide with the rest. The narrator of the second-person narrative (subsequently revealed to be Hoa, a character accompanying Essun in her pursuit to locate her daughter) is neither the central figure in the recounted tale (which is assumed and focalised by Essun, as she is living/experiencing her life) nor the recipient of the

narrative he unfolds (the “you” that corresponds to Essun’s fragmented/post-trauma self).

The distinction between the latter two, namely, Essun’s dual narrative positioning, lies in what DelConte calls “different diegetic planes”, meaning the different communicative levels from which each fictional agent stems (211). Thus, in the passage from chapter one where the narrative states, “You are she. She is you. You are Essun. Remember? The woman whose son is dead” (Jemisin 14), the apparent alignment of “You”, “Essun”, and “She” is—from a narratological perspective—merely coincidental. The “Essun” referenced in “You” represents a distinct iteration post-trauma, serving as the story’s recipient, while the “Essun” referenced in “She” depicts a past version, the protagonist of the narrated story. Therefore, the second-person narration is strategically employed to accentuate the increasing divergence in Essun’s identity across time by, ironically, foregrounding the seeming alignment between the functions of the narratee and the protagonist, both of which are ostensibly assumed by the same person, namely, Essun.

The aforementioned effect of identity fragmentation and self-displacement is further advanced by virtue of focalisation. In the second-person narration, the narrative is focalised through Essun’s past self as she navigates through life. What holds the utmost significance is the realisation that this focalised viewpoint is achieved through the intermediary lens of the narrator, conveyed through the implicit “I” within the “you”. Thereby, paradoxically, Essun’s narrative perspective is only accessible to the reader due to the narrator’s intervening second-person narration; while Essun is

ostensibly positioned as the narrative's central focus, it is in fact through the perspective of the narrator (Hoa's) that Essun's focalisation is manifested:

The child is an immediate problem. He's filthy, for one. You couldn't see this the night before in the dark, but he's absolutely covered in dried and drying mud [...], [c]aught in a mudslide, probably; those happen a lot during shakes. [...] When you question him about this -and everything else- he's cagey. He shouldn't be old enough to be effectively cagey, but he is. [...] He says he doesn't have any parents. He doesn't know his use name – which, you are certain, is a blatant lie. (105)

Also, you might be screaming a little. You shouldn't be screaming. You should be dead. You should have died before your children. You should have died at birth, and never lived to bear them. You should have – You should have – (272)

The effect of the use of second-person narration combined with internal focalisation which is fixed on Essun, is the invitation to the reader to adopt Essun's focal point and to read the story as if she were also the one narrating it, thereby mimicking the effects of internal monologue or free indirect speech. As Fludernik (2001) argues, "the text's address function can frequently be read as self-address", an effect of second-person mode that can render "the distinction between interior monologue and second-person fiction [...] entirely arbitrary" ("Second Person Narrative" 289). The more one engages with the two excerpts provided above as a representation of *The Fifth Season's* narrative style, the more inclined one becomes to associate the narrator with the protagonist, thereby overlooking Hoa's narrative voice entirely on account of the monologic reading's verisimilitude. As Mishra aptly argues,

“the ‘you’ works as a facilitator that eases the process of identification and empathy of the readers with Essun”—through the effect of internal focalisation within the second-person mode, which encourages readers to experience the narrative both *as* and *through* Essun’s internal monologue—“but at the level of the narrative, this ‘you’ seems to endanger its own identity” (4).

As discussed above through DelConte’s typology, while the second-person pronoun occupies three distinct narrative positions—“endangering” its own identity by shifting form to reveal different functions and produce varied significations—it still engenders the illusion that Essun embodies both the implied narrating “I” within the “you” and the addressed “you” simultaneously, as if her identity remains undivided and her sense of self remains cohesive. Consequently, the fragmentation of herself becomes even more poignant and affecting to the reader, as they are continually compelled to confront and reconcile the detachment between Essun’s various versions of herself under the complex manipulation of second-person interpellation. Furthermore, Essun’s (the protagonist this time) traumatic mental and physical challenges against the internalised discourse of an oppressive authority -like the systemic injustice and the discrimination and exploitation of Orogenes as a marginalised group- through the Fulcrum’s regime, advances the theme of identity fragmentation by underlining the mental dichotomy of Essun’s identity into past (pre-trauma) and present (post-trauma) self. At the same time, this thematic dichotomy is narratively manifested as the narratee’s and protagonist’s functional dichotomy of essentially the same fictional entity.

Coming back to the topos of memory, Essun's detachment from her own recollections, as the key elements that safeguard her identity, and the need for a narrator to lead the narrative through her eyes with the purpose of reminding her where she comes from, allow for an interesting dialogic relationship with Toni Morrison's view of memory:

First of all, I must trust my own recollections. I must also depend on the recollections of others. Thus memory weighs heavily in what I write, in how I begin and in what I find to be significant. [...] These "memories within" are the subsoil of my work. But memories and recollections won't give me total access to the unwritten interior life of these people. Only the act of the imagination can help me. ("Site" 92)

The ramifications of memory in *The Fifth Season* are formally and thematically significant, as they give shape to both the novel's narrative structure (by virtue of the second-person chapters) and the theme of identity fragmentation. Regarding the latter aspect, Essun's absence of memory becomes the catalyst for advancing the plot, since it serves as the impetus for the narrative's initiation. Facilitated by the absence of memory, the ongoing narrative unfolds, recounting the transformative events that have defined Essun's life. Gradually, it becomes evident to the reader that these experiences have collectively crafted a tale of metamorphosis, as it is later revealed that Damaya matured into Syenite who then evolved into Essun: "[...] pain is what shapes us, after all. We are creatures born of heat and pressure and grinding, ceaseless movement. To be still is to be... not alive" (Jemisin 361).

The process of changing shape and form, of metamorphosing, is tightly connected to the pain and trauma of leaving something behind, of letting go. This connection becomes apparent in the episode where it is disclosed that Damaya and Syenite are one and the same person, during the ritual of name-choosing, as Damaya undergoes a test that ensures her eligibility to become an Imperial Orogene: “I, I picked a rogor name.’ [...] She licks her lips. ‘Syenite. [...] It forms at the edge of a tectonic plate. With heat and pressure it does not degrade, but instead grows stronger.’ [...] So she fights off the tears, and makes her decision. Crying is weakness. Crying was a thing Damaya did. Syenite will be stronger” (331). The name-choosing, which echoes and simultaneously reclaims the practice of renaming enslaved individuals to assert ownership and control over them, symbolises the shedding of Syenite’s former identity and, by extension, her departure from a former way of living.

In addition to her old name, Syenite also leaves behind her old idea of a family unit, as she now enters the regime of Fulcrum accompanied only by Shaffa, her Guardian. Syenite will, years after that point in the narrative, meet Alabaster, her mentor and partner, with whom she will create a new family unit, which will then be shattered, resulting in her killing of her son, in one of the most crucial episodes of the novel, in order to protect him from the future’s inevitability. Ultimately, Essun, having established a new family with two children, grapples with the tragedy of losing her loved ones anew; this sorrow unfolds when her husband, upon discovering their son's Orogenic abilities, fatally harms their young boy. Her daughter disappears alongside her father, compounding Essun’s anguish.

Therefore, the recurrent theme of familial loss in the novel is intricately linked to memory loss, which, in turn, translates into identity loss. This phenomenon is narratively manifested through the utilisation of the second-person narrative mode, which is employed to produce the following effects. The second-person narration is manipulated to put emphasis on the increasing divergence in Essun's identity across time by, ironically, highlighting the ostensible alignment between the functions of two distinct fictional agents, the narratee and the protagonist, both of which are seemingly assumed by the same entity, namely, Essun. In addition, the employment of internal focalisation in the second-person mode engenders the illusion that Essun embodies both the implied narrating "I" within the "You" and the addressed "You" simultaneously (mimicking the rhetorical effects of internal monologue), challenging the reader to confront and reconcile the detachment between her different selves. Finally, the second-person narration enables the effect of what I call joint re-action (drawing from and building on Rembowska-Płuciennik) by virtue of mimesis.

This mimetic contiguity takes place between Essun (the narratee) and the reader since the latter represents and assumes what Essun's reactive position would be as she is told the narrative in progress, creating the illusion of identification and dramatising the mental battles of the protagonist. Overall, the second-person narration, which in Jemisin's novel is realised through the narrative dichotomy between protagonist and narratee, is rendered the narratological manifestation of the thematic dichotomy of identity between past and present self, pre- and post-slavery-related-trauma living. In the section that follows, I will explore Black motherhood as the impetus for this identity fragmentation and trauma response, relating it to identity construction through the interpretation of "maternal" narration.

Black Motherhood

Motherhood serves as the catalyst for Essun's journey towards reclaiming her sense of selfhood. As depicted in the following passage from the novel, the more she is shown her role as a mother, the more closely she is able to identify with her own sense of singular identity:

You could become someone new, maybe. [...] But. Only one you is Nassun's mother. That's what's forestalled you so far, and ultimately is the deciding factor. At the end of all this, when Jija is dead and it's finally safe to mourn your son... if she still lives, Nassun will need the mother she's known all her life. So you must stay Essun, and Essun will have to make do with the broken bits of herself that Jija left behind. [...] You have no choice. Not as long as one of your children could be alive. (Jemisin 172-173)

While Essun's identity is subjected to enslavement within the regime of Fulcrum, the novel does not portray motherhood as another, figurative this time, form of slavery of the body. Nevertheless, motherhood is portrayed as complicated, thereby depicting the profound inherent metamorphosis that the maternal role entails.

The protagonist of *The Fifth Season* becomes a mother three times; first, as Syenite, when she gives birth to Coru, and then, as Essun, when she gives birth to Nassun and Uche. In all three instances, the narrative skips the protagonist's pregnancy, focusing on the relationship between her and her children in the first years of their lives. Between Coru's conception and his toddler years, there is a gap in the narrative that is filled with an interlude from the unnamed narrator: "*There passes a time of happiness in your life, which I will not describe to you. [...] But what is important*

is that you know it was not all terrible. There was peace in long stretches, between each crisis. A chance to cool and solidify before the grind resumed" (361; italics in original).

Right after the interlude, a new chapter begins from the perspective of Syenite that unveils this temporal gap through an explicit ellipsis in a dialogue that takes place between herself and another character: "'No,' he says, staring at her like she's insane. 'You are not *being a pirate* when you just had a baby.' 'I had the baby **two years ago**'" (362; italics in original; my emphasis). In those first two years, we learn as the chapter progresses, Coru is nurtured not only by his mother and father, Alabaster, but also by the rest of the women in the community, as per the comm's social customs. Syenite "never wanted a child" but "she does feel a sense of accomplishment [...] because she and Alabaster have managed to make one beautiful child between them" (Jemisin 365). She looks at her son as a "marvel", as something "so whole and right", and even so "that doesn't mean she wants to spend every hour of every rusting day in his presence" (365-366).

Even when Alabaster tells Syenite that she is free to leave the community if she wills, now that they have fulfilled their purpose of creating a "rogga child" together (367), and that he will take care of Coru by himself if needed, she is adamant about her maternal role. Navigating the complexities of motherhood within the harsh realities of a dystopian world marked by catastrophic geological events and sociopolitical injustice, her driving force is to bring change in the world to make things better for her son (371). Even though Coru is being bred into life under the eugenics of the Fulcrum, the essentialism of Syenite's body does not lead to the formation of a

dysphoric or dystopic body as a consequence. According to Katharyn Privett and her article “Dystopic Bodies and Enslaved Motherhood” (2007), writers like Alice Walker (*Meridian*), Toni Morrison (*Beloved*) and Margaret Atwood (*The Handmaid’s Tale*) “held out for further proof and questioned maternal feminism as suicidal. For, to essentialize a body, however voluntarily, inevitably leads to the lack of a possessable body - the first premise of slavery. The postmodern woman’s response would be the suggestion of the dystopic body most evident in their creation of the unlivability of a maternal utopia” (Privett 258). A similar viewpoint to Privett’s is shared in Dorothy Roberts’ book-length study of slavery and procreation titled *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction and the Meaning of Liberty* (1999), which regards childbearing as a means of sustaining slavery, since “it replenished the enslaved labor force: Black women bore children who belonged to the slaveowner from the moment of their conception” (22-23).

Far from a “maternal utopia”, *The Fifth Season* illustrates a Black mother’s experiences as shaped by the systemic inequalities and discrimination present within a dystopic world, where she must navigate oppressive institutions while striving to ensure the safety and well-being of her family. Syenite undergoes the effects of slavery-reminiscent tactics and systems of oppression, such as the breeding of children, yet her maternal role—contrary to what Privett identifies as “pregnancy as slavery” (259)—is what makes the livability of the future possible. Although for female Orogenes to have a body is to have an additional way of being controlled and exploited, Black motherhood is not depicted as dystopic nor as “the continuation of prenatal slavery, made possible by the maternal female body that has harbored malicious intent all along” (Privett 262).

In addition, the narrative challenges the traditional tendency to frame the Black maternal body and to render it politically intelligible through “its imagined proximity to trauma, injury, precarity—by its location as *the crisis*”, a pattern Jennifer C. Nash (2018, 2021) examines and critiques throughout her work (“Birthing Black Mothers” 30; italics in original). “Indeed, there has been intensified scholarly and popular interest in representing black motherhood as both a site constituted by grief and expected loss and as a political position made visible (only) because of its proximity to death”, contends Nash in “The Political Life of Black Motherhood” (700), demonstrating the connection between Black maternity and Black politics. In a similar vein, Jemisin’s novel presents a nuanced portrayal of Black maternal existence within an oppressive fictional world—one that moves away from its frequent framing as “*the symbol [...] for the deathly work of antiblackness and misogyny*” (Nash, “Birthing Black Mothers” 30; italics in original). This deviation does not deny the potential existence of the “dystopic body” (Privett 258) within maternal experience, but rather reimagines and resignifies motherhood as a site of resilience within dystopia.

Nonetheless, Jemisin’s portrayal of Black motherhood remains closely connected to the notion of control in the novel, continuing to echo slavery-related practices. Coming back to Roberts, she begins her analysis with the story of Rose William’s, a sixteen-year-old Black enslaved girl who was made to share a bunk with a mature enslaved Black man by her master to make children for him and his plantation. In doing so, Roberts showcases the central role of self-control in Black women’s childbearing in bondage, “as a product of oppression rather than an expression of self-definition and personhood” (23). This way, the system exhibited “one of slavery’s most odious features: it forced its victims to perpetuate the very institution that subjugated

them by bearing children who were born the property of their masters” (Roberts 24). The theme of self-regulation is prominent in *The Fifth Season*, extending beyond the realm of eugenics—such as Syenite's compliance with the breeding enforcement system to avoid death—to encompass the broader oppressive structure of the Fulcrum.

Little Damaya realises the power of self-control in her childhood, after being assigned to the Fulcrum and undergoing training to turn her Orogeny into usefulness, because “that’s what she is now, an unimportant bit of rock ready to be polished into usefulness, or at least to help grind other, better rocks” (Jemisin 191). But even before this, as I have discussed earlier, Damaya was continuously asked by her guardian, who retrieved her from her family’s house, to practice self-control even under the most excruciating circumstances. To prove his point, Schaffa broke her hand, demonstrating the power that was granted to him by the Fulcrum over Orogenes to keep her under control. In Fulcrum's regime, the concept of self-restraint carries a dual significance: it signifies both survival for Orogenes (granted by compliance with the governmental policy) and the protection of others from the potentially harmful abilities of orogenic individuals.

When Orogenes under the custody of Guardians demonstrate such self-discipline during their training, they earn the designation of Imperial Orogenes and are deployed across Stillness to manipulate the natural environment (such as sealing volcanoes) in anticipation of the next major Season. They are entrusted with this task because they have effectively mastered their powers, thereby avoiding accidental harm while practicing Orogeny. However, failure to demonstrate sufficient success or

self-obedience results in their murder. Black motherhood, then, might be the product of such compliance due to fear of death, resulting in perpetuating slavery, as Roberts mentions, but is simultaneously not limited to or defined by it. Motherhood, in the novel's realm, transcends the confines of slavery-related discourse, illustrating the resilience, strength, and enduring power of maternal love in the face of severe oppression and adversity.

Furthermore, even though the narrative voice in *The Fifth Season* is not maternal in the sense that it is not the homodiegetic mother who narrates her own or her daughter's life story, it is ultimately the element of motherhood that activates the memory, being utilised in recovering personal history. As Jana Evans Braziel underlines in *Diaspora: An Introduction* (1994), "[r]emembrance, or historical memory, is a creative act of diasporic longing, if not the actual recovery of a lost ancestral African homeland, yet it remains a necessary creative act" (17). In the context of Essun's story, the notion of diaspora pertains to the diasporic sense of identity; the dispersed selves among different timelines (Damaya, Syenite and Essun) come together through the narrative act of remembering, or, more specifically, reminding. The narrator is the one to remind the narratee of her personal and ancestral history, but most importantly of her role as a mother, which is the impetus for remembrance.

The tradition of female Black mothers as narrators in Diaspora novels like the ones that Helen Crump studies in "Mother's Voice – Having Her Say: Storytelling in Articulating Black Women's Diaspora Identity" (2015), like Sandra Jackson-Opoku's *The River Where Blood Is Born*, Dionne Brand's *At the Full and Change of the Moon* and Maryse Condé's *Desirada*, is not replicated in Jemisin's novel, but implements the

tradition's influences through the second-person narrative. The heterodiegetic narrator, Hoa, narrates Essun's timeline in a manner reminiscent of a mother speaking to her unborn child during pregnancy. Through recounting the collective and personal past of their people, Hoa's "maternal" narrative voice not only preserves the history of Orogenes, akin to how Black mothers relay memories of slavery to their daughters in neo-slave novels, but also reconstructs Essun's memory through storytelling. As Crump underlines, "[s]torytelling, and the agency involved in it, is an example of this reinterpreting of black women's experiences across cultures within the Diaspora. 'For many of us, memory through storytelling is what inscribes our history' [Reyes 129] whether that be personal history told through stories between mothers and daughters or narratives shared on a broader cultural, national, and/or racial history" (21-22). Likewise, Hoa's "maternal" role of passing down to Essun the history of Orogenes additionally entails the inscription of her own story as a Black, Orogenic mother, exhibiting the link between memory and selfhood. Consequently, the employment of second-person perspective in *The Fifth Season* "emphasizes the value of memory through storytelling in constructing identity" by virtue of the reinterpretation of "maternal" narration (Crump 26).

Terraforming

Along with the generic and psychological metamorphosis that encompasses the novel, environmental transformation plays a vital role in the sociopolitical system of the Stillness. To analyse the narrative depiction of environmentalism, I will use the term "terraforming" as is employed in Chris Pak's *Terraforming: Ecopolitical Transformations and Environmentalism in Science Fiction* (2016), to amplify the

transitional nature of eco-fictional elements in *The Fifth Season* as well as their intersection to the novel's sociopolitical concerns. The notion of terraforming in fiction describes "stories of planetary adaptation" and includes "methods for modifying a planet's climate, atmosphere, topology, and ecology" (Pak 1). Additionally, according to Pak, "[s]cientists and environmental philosophers have used the concept of terraforming as a thought experiment to consider human relationships to environments undergoing change" (8-9). *The Fifth Season*, as well as the whole of the *Broken Earth* trilogy, is a tale about transition, particularly, transition as metamorphosis, as transformation: "This is what you must remember: the ending of one story is just the beginning of another. This has happened before, after all. People die. Old orders pass. New societies are born. When we say "the world has ended", it's actually a lie, because *the planet* is just fine" (Jemisin 14; italics in original).

For generations, the inhabitants of the Stillness, the singular supercontinent that forms the primary setting of the novel's world, have honed their ability to anticipate the arrival of various Seasons. These Seasons bring with them the perpetual threat of natural disasters such as earthquakes, tsunamis, and prolonged winters. As a result, each community has been meticulously constructed with robust urban engineering systems designed to safeguard its residents in the event of a Season's occurrence. As the reader learns relatively early on in the novel, Seasons were initially Father Earth's way of "shap[ing] [humans] out of animals", of cultivating their mental and physical abilities to problem solve, work together and create communities (115). But after acquiring all these skills and more, humans started disrupting earthly life and ultimately "turned on Him, and He has burned with hatred for [them] ever since" (115), "wanting nothing more than to destroy the life infesting its once-pristine

surface" (146). Although Father Earth, according to the legends, did not himself create earthly life, the initially predictable Seasons were his contribution to strengthening it. Rather than being appreciative of his fostering nature, humans started progressively killing other species, poisoned the water surfaces, and "drilled through the crust of his skin, past the blood of his mantle, to get at the sweet marrow of his bones" (379-380).

Therefore, the concept of terraforming gains a dual meaning in Jemisin's novel; it refers to the various seasonal formations that were initiated by Earth himself as a response to the need for sustaining human life, and to the destructive formations of the land that were caused by humans "aimed at adapting the environmental parameters [...] for [their] inhabitation" (Pak 1). The human greediness to completely intervene in the natural landscape and exploit the power that was granted to them by Father Earth raises multiple questions on environmental ethics related to the notion of environmental otherness.

Eric C. Otto, in his book *Green Speculations: Science Fiction and Transformative Environmentalism* (2012), draws the connection between what he calls "ethics of environmental difference" and Luce Irigaray's concept of "ethics of sexual difference" through Kathleen Dean Moor's notion of "wonder". To experience wonder "at the sight of [...] geological features" is to "find in them strength or reawakening surprise [by being] receptive to the stories they tell, and thus be willing to listen and perceive without human egotism or possessiveness" (Otto 12). Otto argues that this sense of wonder towards what can be considered as different or other to the human understanding and experience, is what gives rise to an ethics of ecological difference, akin to Luce Irigaray's concept of an "ethics of sexual difference", an ethical approach

which involves perceiving everything anew, without attempting to assert control or dominance over the observed object (Otto 12).

The concept of environmental difference is realised in Jemisin's novel through the broad lens of human/non-human encounters. The novel's intratextual mythology surrounding Father Earth and his exploitation by humans illustrates the complexity of environmental ethics in an interesting manner, as the Other is not approached as a fixed semantic category. In the realm of genre fiction, particularly science fiction, the concept of Otherness typically pertains to the discriminatory perception of non-human entities by humans, yet in *The Fifth Season*, this dynamic is subverted as humans themselves are also subjected to being engaged with as Other. Despite being created by Father Earth, who is the progenitor and simultaneously creator of all life, humans are consistently positioned as the embodiment of Otherness from Father Earth's perspective. Thus, the concept of terraforming extends beyond planetary exploitation and adaptation, and can be equally applied to human life, to the extent that the planet attempted to "modif[y] [humans'] ecology" by intervening in their bodily autonomy with Seasons (Pak 1).

In that regard, both the body of the planet and the human body are approached as surfaces for "adaptation", illustrating the complexity of the concepts of Otherness and violence transmutation. The contiguity between the planetary and the human body is further amplified if we consider terraforming in relation to motherhood. Similar to the "drill[ing] through [...] [Father Earth's] skin" (Jemisin 379) as a form of invasion of the planetary body to exploit and harvest its creations, women's bodies in the Stillness are mined in comparable ways. As I have analysed in

the previous section, powerful women like Syenite are expected to contribute to the creation of the next generation of Orogenes, “leaving [the women] nothing to do but lie on [their] back” (71) and succumb to their reproductive duties. This image evokes the drilling of the planetary body and demonstrates the parallel mining of women’s bodies (motherhood) and the natural environment (terraforming) by harvesting their offsprings.

Another layer of human/non-human encounters can be located in the dynamic between Stills (/non-Orogenes) and Orogenes. As I have analysed in detail thus far, Orogenes are consistently relegated to an inferior status, treated as slaves within society. Referred to derogatorily as “roggas”, this term serves as a slur employed by both Stills and Orogenes themselves, highlighting the latter’s ostracised sociopolitical position. The following extract stems from a dialogue between Alabaster and Syenite, referencing their exploitation of Fulcrum:

“You think *you* matter?” [...] You think any of us matter beyond what we can do for them? Whether we obey or not. [...] But each of us is just another weapon, to them. Just a useful monster, just a bit of new blood to add to the breeding lines. Just another fucking *rogga*.” She had never heard so much hate put into one word before. (143; italics in original)

As a result, the concept of the non-human carries a dual significance within the framework of *The Fifth Season*. It signifies the species-specific distinction between Stills (humans) and Orogenes (non-humans), while also denoting the latter’s perception and treatment as sub-human entities. To be considered non-human (namely, to deviate from the human species-specific norms in one way or another) is

to be treated as sub-human (namely, as a lower order of being, as less than), which is particularly amplified when the novel is read from a neo-slave narrative standpoint within the generic context of science fiction.

Moreover, the notion of otherness in the novel is once again closely linked to the concept of violent transmutation. In addition to the Stills, who are ordinary individuals without orogenic abilities and seek to distance themselves from Orogenes (and may even attempt to kill them), the most formidable adversary of Orogenes is the Fulcrum, the paramilitary organisation that rules over Stillness. What stands as significant is that the Fulcrum is comprised of only Orogenes. The governing system is run by the same marginalised, othered species who are concurrently being hunted down, killed, bred to order and severely exploited. Hence, the oppressed individuals transform into oppressors, demonstrating the intricate and transformative essence of violence that ensues from longstanding systemic injustice.

Revisiting the use of second-person narration in Jemisin's novel and connecting it to the portrayal of Otherness, I argue that the narrative enacts the concept of Otherness through the narrative device of defamiliarisation. In many narratological discussions surrounding the second-person perspective, Viktor Shklovsky's term comes up as one of the main rhetorical effects of second-person fiction. Specifically, Brian Richardson discusses that "the uncommon if unremarkable thought is teasingly framed by the unusual mode of narration" and that "a rather ordinary perception [...] is totally transformed when articulated by a second person narrator" (315). Kim Wickham, in her article "Identity, Memory, Slavery" (2019), situates the use of defamiliarisation in *The Fifth Season* in the reader's difficulty in assigning different

narratives to specific characters (396). Building on Wickham's thesis, I particularly argue that the employment of alternating perspectives in the novel (Essun's, Syenite's and Damaya's) and of alternating narrative modes (second and third person respectively) presents the concept of Otherness in an uncommon and estranging manner. Specifically, the employment of the second-person narrative serves as the narrative embodiment of the Other while simultaneously depicting the act of Othering.

The presence of the "you" in the narrative implies a differentiation between itself and the narrating "I", as well as between "you" and potentially "they", engendering a difference between distinct subject categories. It constitutes both the Other and at the same time an act of *Othering* because it creates a distance between the narrating "I" (which is implied in the "you"), the narratee (the "you" itself) and "Other" agencies. Put differently, the multiplicity of narrative modes that are enabled by the unfamiliar second person (since the first and particularly the third person are the most common ones in literature) mirrors the different identities of the Other(s) that are excluded from the "you". From Damaya, Syenite and Hoa (the narrator) to the Stills, Father Earth and the Fulcrum, the second-person mode excludes all other fictional agents except for Essun (the narratee), resulting in an Othering effect. At the same time, because of this exclusion, the second person also separates Essun (from) herself, the semantic subject of "you", rendering her the Other in her own life story.

Within the context of Black women's speculative fiction—a genre to which *The Fifth Season* inherently belongs—the effect of defamiliarisation takes on added significance. As Sami Schalk asserts in her book *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)ability,*

Race, and Gender in Black Women's Speculative Fiction (2018), Black female authors like N.K. Jemisin³² use speculative and nonrealist worlds to disrupt familiar social categories, revealing how the meaning and experience of (dis)ability, race, gender, and sexuality shift depending on individual bodyminds as well as their social and environmental contexts (115). Although Schalk's primary focus is on disability when she argues that it "is too easily abstracted into a metaphor for loss, damage, or evil *or* made too solid and steady as an easily knowable and recognizable medical/biological fact of the bodymind" (115; italics in original), her critique can also be extended to race in *The Fifth Season*. Through the novel's use of second-person narration and the alienating effect it creates, Jemisin resists framing Otherness as either a simplistic metaphor for marginalisation or weakness, or as a black-and-white and easily recognisable state. Instead, she complicates the notion of Otherness, illustrating how it can metamorphose into a mechanism for reproducing violence—particularly as it is transferred from one Othered group to another, such as from the institutionally empowered Orogenes of the Fulcrum—who were once decentred Orogenes themselves—to the currently marginalised Orogenes (including characters like Essun, Nassun, Hoa, and others) and vice versa.

This is why Essun, by means of the second-person perspective, is not only excluded from the world that exists outside of the "you" (a pronoun which focuses directly and only on her, as the narratee, the receiver of the narrative), but is also estranged from herself in her other narrative role as the protagonist of her own story.

³² In the fourth chapter of her book, titled "Defamiliarizing (Dis)ability, Race, Gender and Sexuality", Schalk discusses another of Jemisin's novels, *The Broken Kingdoms*, highlighting how defamiliarisation operates in a different context and to a different effect, yet still within the broader framework of Black women's speculative fiction (114-135).

The second-person perspective enacts a dissociation that reflects her internal fragmentation, her detachment from the trauma of witnessing her son's death and losing her daughter, and her complicity in the very system of oppression she once served as Damaya and, especially, Syenite. In this way, defamiliarisation becomes a narrative strategy that underscores both the complexity of Black motherhood and the complexity of occupying intersecting roles within an oppressive structure, by estranging and complicating the "familiar" discourse of race-based marginalisation and systemic injustice.

Finally, the significance of defamiliarisation as a narrative technique—particularly as it emerges through the second-person perspective—is further emphasised when *The Fifth Season* is situated within the context of Afrofuturism. In her book *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (2013), Ytasha Womack articulates the essence of defamiliarisation—though she does not name it explicitly—by describing the process of rendering the familiar strange, positioning this strategy at the core of Afrofuturistic works, as shown here:

[T]here's a conscious *reorientation process* that takes place, almost as if you were dropped into a far-off land. But the land *feels familiar*, a reality that is soothing for some and *unsettling* for others. It's as if the artists want you to remember something, and they discuss it in such a matter-of-fact way that you figure you must know. But do you? There's an unconscious game of trying to remember a memory, a time or space when and where these *familiar oddities* weren't so bizarre. *It's the familiarity with the seemingly bizarre that*

leads to the aha moment. Female Afrofuturists create their own norm, and the rest of the world just tries to catch up. (104; my italics)

Seen through this lens, Jemisin's defamiliarisation can be viewed as functioning in a dual way; towards Essun (the narratee) and towards the reader. The strive of "trying and remember a memory" resembles Essun's journey as the narratee to receive her memories back in the form of narrated episodes from her life by Hoa, the narrator, until the imaginary "aha moment" comes along where we imagine Essun putting the pieces of her life story together. This participation in the narrative's "unconscious game" of making sense of the unfamiliar that feels oddly familiar, extends to the reader as well, reflecting Essun's role as the fictional receiver of her life narrative—a dynamic enabled by the second-person perspective and, specifically, by what I have already described as a joint re-action, drawing on Rembowska-Płuciennik's concept of "joint action" (160).

Through defamiliarising techniques and the blending of realistic themes within speculative frameworks, Jemisin's work aligns with Afrofuturist narratives³³, in that—as Ytasha Womack notes—"Afrofuturism is the subconscious's way of knocking at the door of present awareness, infusing those who are receptive with ideas and stories from worlds and times forever lost" (96). In *The Broken Earth* trilogy, Jemisin constructs a fictional cosmogony that reimagines the planet as a sentient, paternal figure, effectively personifying Earth as a Father. This creation myth, interwoven with allusions

³³ For an extensive analysis of Afrofuturism in *The Broken Earth* trilogy, see Lisa Dowdall's "Black Futures Matter: Afrofuturism and Geontology in N. K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth Trilogy*", and Imogen Bagnall's *Afrofuturism and Generational Trauma in N. K. Jemisin's Broken Earth Trilogy*, as the Afrofuturistic dimensions of the novel become more fully realised in the subsequent two instalments of the trilogy—particularly in the third.

that echo cosmological and mythological traditions, serves as a central narrative thread throughout the series. And, in doing so, Jemisin reconfigures the meaning of Black motherhood—positioning it within a speculative and mythic frame that both estranges and reanimates familiar narratives of trauma, survival, resilience, and, most importantly, transformation.

Conclusions

In *The Fifth Season*, the concept of transformation operates on both a thematic and a structural level—a dynamic made possible through the intratextual interaction between perspective and gender, specifically as expressed through Black motherhood. This intersection—foregrounded through a contextual and feminist narratological lens—activates the interdependence between narrative form and content, allowing them to mutually illuminate and shape one another. Jemisin metamorphoses the slave narrative tradition into a postmodern neo-slave speculative form with Afrofuturistic elements, subverting the second-person mode traditionally used in early slave narratives to address white readers out of rhetorical necessity. Instead, she reclaims this mode to centre the narrative on the Black experience. Simultaneously, the conventionally autobiographical first-person narration is transformed into a second-person interpellation that foregrounds the complexity of Black subjectivity, while also bridging pre- and post-slavery identity.

Just as little Damaya transforms into the powerful Syenite, and Syenite into the complex Essun, the novel's recurring theme of familial loss is intricately tied to memory loss, which in turn translates into identity loss. On a discourse level, this sequence of transformations is structurally expressed through the second-person

perspective: it first creates the illusion of identification by dramatising Essun's internal struggles, then gradually dismantles this illusion by foregrounding the gap between past and present self—mirroring the lived experience of trauma, displacement, and survival. In turning to Black motherhood as a site of resilience within dystopia, Jemisin crafts an unconventional “maternal” narrative voice through the second-person, echoing maternal narration in Diaspora literature. Here, the second-person mode, in dialogue with gender as an intratextual element located in narrative voice, becomes a facilitator for the recovery of memory and, by extension, personal history. Essun's role as a mother becomes the impetus for remembrance, foregrounding the intrinsic link between memory and selfhood—and, more importantly, between narrated content and narrative form.

Further, within the novel's portrayal of environmental metamorphosis and human/non-human encounters, both the planetary and human bodies are depicted as adaptive surfaces—sites of transformation— that complicate the notions of Otherness and the transmutation of violence. This is narratively manifested through defamiliarisation, which positions the reader and the narratee in a shared space of reactive engagement with the narrative. The second-person perspective, with its simultaneously inclusive and exclusive nature, underscores the complexity of Otherness—its ability to both draw in and push away— depending on who is included or excluded in any given moment. This shifting dynamic gives rise to alternating narrative modes that shape one another—just as the novel's themes continually mould and generate one another—reinforcing that the relationship between structural and thematic elements is not one of mere succession, but one of transformation.

Segment Two: Transformation in Dis-/Re-Location

Chapter Three

Genetic and Narrative Sources: Hybrid Focalisation in *Middlesex* (2002) by Jeffrey Eugenides

Introduction

If temporality and perspective are potentially the most studied and the most diverse structural elements in narrative processing, respectively, focalisation is by far the most complex and challenging one to discern. Unlike, for instance, perspective, which is mostly stable (or, at least, stably variable) throughout a narrative, focalisation is determined both by and within specific narrative passages, rendering it extremely fluid and non-fixable on a text throughout. Generally, focalisation “may be defined as a selection or restriction of narrative information in relation to the experience and knowledge of the narrator, the characters or other, more hypothetical entities in the storyworld” (Niederhoff).³⁴ The focalising subject of the narrative is determined by the answer to the question “who sees?” as opposed to the question “who speaks?” which designates the perspective from which a story is told—a distinction established by Gérard Genette in *Narrative Discourse: An Essay In Method* (186).³⁵

³⁴ Burkhard Niederhoff, “Focalization”, *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, Paragraph 1.

³⁵ Originally, however, Genette meant for it to be an interchangeable term with—as well as a “reformulation” of—perspective and/or point of view, designating the situating of the narrator or character in relation to their telling and their positioning in the story. In *Narrative Discourse*, he analyses focalisation (as well as perspective) under the category of mood rather than voice, namely, under the “class of determination” that deals with “modalities (forms and degrees) of narrative “representation” (Genette 31). To distinguish what he refers to as “the focus of narration” (an expression that derives from Cleanth Brooks’ and Robert Penn Warren’s *Understanding Fiction*) from the visual-bound notion of point of view, he uses focalisation.

Focalisation can also be defined as the utilisation of “a visual metaphor for determining the source of fictional knowledge” (Fludernik, “New Wine in Old Bottles?” 635). This definition illustrates not only the subject “who sees”, the focaliser, but also the object of said perception, the focal point. Genette distinguishes between three types of focalisation: zero, internal and external. Zero focalisation describes an (omniscient) “narrator [who] knows more than the character, or more exactly, says more than any of the characters knows”, internal focalisation designates a “narrator [who] says only what a given character knows” and, lastly, external focalisation a “narrator [who] says less than the character knows” (Genette 188-189). In these instances, the focal point—the object of perception and representation- is the internal feelings and thoughts of the characters or the absence thereof. As will be discussed in my analysis, focalisation is usually approached as a metaphor rather than a rigidly conceptual term, upon which a story’s ideological undertones are implicitly reflected, thereby inherently underscoring the interdependence between form and content.³⁶

In this chapter of my thesis, I explore the interplay between narrative form and narrated content in Jeffrey Eugenides’ *Middlesex* from the standpoint of contextual narratology. Although *Middlesex* is a text that many theorists of narrative have written about—most often examining the relationship between the representation of intersex subjectivity and the narrative dichotomy—focalisation still remains an understudied area in the novel’s critical bibliography. Kianna Middleton (2021) draws attention to

³⁶ As Wim Bronzwaer notes in his discussion on Mieke Bal’s conceptualisation of the notion, “focalization does not only refer to the actual process of seeing or observing, which can only take place in a situation of spatio-temporal proximity of focalizer and focalized object, but also to such processes as thinking, deliberating, judging and, in particular, remembering [...]. These two kinds of focalization (let us call them physical and psychological) cover two modes of perception that in my opinion essentially different in a number of respects crucial to narrative theory” (“Mieke Bal’s Concept of Focalization” 197).

Cal's "careful storytell[ing]", which signals "the removal of disruptive characters and environments" (34), while Stephanie Hsu (2011)—whom I draw from in my analysis of intersex intelligibility—examines the novel's "split narration" between two "narrative perspectives" (100). Yanoula Athanassakis (2012) calls attention to the "binary-driven separation between mind and body" (223), and Olivia Banner (2010) interprets the "novel's voice [as] [...] heteronormative" (857) arguing that "[a]lthough the body is of indeterminate sex, its performance both within the novel's world and within the novel's voice remains determinately that of hetero-identified masculinity" (858). Even though focalisation plays a significant role in the functions discussed by these theorists, none of them explicitly use the term "focalisation" to describe these—or related—narrative dynamics.

It seems more essential than ever to employ a narratological focus on *Middlesex*, as this approach enables an interrogation of both the narrative formation of intersexuality and the complex, significant functions of focalisation in relation to intersexuality's intelligibility and recognisability. Chiara Pellegrini's work (2022)—from the standpoint of trans narratology—has been instrumental in this direction in recent years, examining how "*Middlesex* curtails Callie's trans-inhabitation through eschewing focalisation from her and continually commenting on her thoughts and actions, evaluating the extent to which they are signs of her 'hidden' masculinity" (*Trans Forms* 204). While my own perspective naturally aligns with Pellegrini's position, it extends the discussion of the novel's narrative manifestation of intersex identity by means of focalisation. Specifically, my analysis is informed by the lens of transformation, as I aim to show how the novel's thematic emphasis on transformation—understood as both literal and metaphorical dis- and re-location—is

textually realised through formal and functional shifts in focalisation, which illuminate key moments in the story that are deeply intertwined with gender. This approach aims to underscore the interdependence between narrative form and narrated content, focalisation and intersex intelligibility, highlighting the productivity of considering the intratextual function of gender as a valuable conduit for these relationships.

Building on Viola Amato's (2016) assertion that "[i]ntersex intelligibility is, yet again, displaced outside the realm of possible" (182), I argue that the impossibility of intersex intelligibility in Eugenides' novel is reflected in, as well as textually constructed by, the narrative impossibility by means of focalisation. By "narrative impossibility", I refer to the ways in which the novel's narrative structures—most notably focalisation—operate in ways that render the impossible possible, often at the expense of the intersex subject. Furthermore, drawing on Michel Foucault's concept of technology and Stephanie Hsu's (2011) reframing of it in the context of *Middlesex* as "narrative technology" (96), I contend that focalisation operates as a narrative technology that produces—as a result of narrative impossibility—the (impossible) intelligibility of intersexuality, by interfacing with the novel's "technologies of power" such as medicine, religion, and culture ("Technologies of the Self" 18).

At the same time, I demonstrate that, just as focalisation serves as "a visual metaphor for determining the source of fictional knowledge" (Fludernik, "New Wine in Old Bottles?" 635), intersex identity in the novel functions—and is treated—as a metaphor for examining the interplay between nature and nurture, achieved through processes of dislocation and relocation, as well as the unfolding of multiple identities and genetic (hi)stories across time. Following that, I identify the type of focalisation

used in narrative instances of the protagonist's gender dysphoria as "hybrid focalisation", as it involves both first- and third-person narration, two types of consciousness and two differently gendered pronouns. In this configuration, consciousness is not simply shared but contested for, as focalisation becomes a site of simultaneous attachment and detachment, struggle and surrender, location and dislocation. Finally, to illustrate the mutual illumination and interdependence of narrative form and narrated content, I also analyse how the shifting focalisation between Callie and her grandmother Desdemona reflects their intertwined relationship, parallel timelines, and mirrored experiences—albeit in reverse—further demonstrating the complex function of focalisation in Eugenides' text.

Focalisation as Consciousness

To begin with, *Middlesex* tells the story of Cal, an intersex individual of Greek descent with 5-alpha-reductase deficiency, who is raised as female and who, after finding out at the age of fourteen about his intersexuality, reclaims his gender and starts identifying and living as male. The main characters of the novel are Cal Stephanides, Desdemona Stephanides (Cal's grandmother), Lefteris "Lefty" Stephanides (his grandfather), Miltiades "Milton" Stephanides (his father) and Theodora "Tessie" Zizmo (his mother). The first half of the novel tells the story of Cal's family and portrays his grandparents' life as orphan siblings, who migrate from Bursa, a city in Asia Minor, to the United States in 1922 in the wake of the Burning of Smyrna. As they assimilate into U.S. society in Detroit, Michigan, getting married and starting a new life as husband and wife, their incestuous relationship leads to a genetic mutation that causes Cal's intersex identity. The latter half of the novel consists of the narration

of Cal's parents' life in Detroit, as well as his own coming-of-age story, the realisation of his intersexuality, his escape to San Francisco and the reclamation of his gender, namely, his transition. Finally, embedded in the narrative are also parts of forty-one-year-old Cal's life in Berlin as an employee for the U.S. Foreign Service, encompassing the narrative present, from which he is able to tell his story retrospectively.

The narrative begins by indicating the overt narrating subject "I"—namely, Cal—who unfolds his identity at once, stating that he "was born twice: first as a baby girl [...] in January 1960; and then as a teenage boy [...] in August of 1974 [...]" (Eugenides 3). He also declares his name assigned at birth along with the respective gender, as well as his current name as recorded on recent documentation. The narrator is autodiegetic, as he is the story's teller while also being its protagonist, thereby conveying the narrative in first-person. Although he is a physical participant in the storyworld only after his birth, his presence feels overarching, ubiquitous, bringing together a multitude of his family's generational stories. The parts of the novel that cover Cal's narrative present in Berlin are significantly shorter and fewer than the rest; they are spread throughout the novel, taking up only a couple of pages every time they are embedded in the narrative. Although the narrative is presented and told from the perspective of Cal, who retrospectively recounts his own life story, as well as those of his parents and grandparents, the novel's focalisation is considerably more complex.

In *Middlesex*, the narrative is primarily conveyed through retrospective narration and a central narrative present, from which the entire story unfolds. This approach employs zero focalisation, according to the Genettian typology, allowing the narrator to access the inner worlds of all characters. This arrangement is especially

pertinent for the timelines of the narrator's parents and grandparents in that the narrator does not physically participate in their lives but still needs to be able to convey their emotions and thoughts in order to describe their part of the story. An example of how this works is illustrated in the following extract, where the narrator describes his mother's thought process without rendering her the focal point of the narration:

Tessie laughed the suggestion off. But **behind her sarcasm was a serious moral reservation**. To tamper with something as mysterious and miraculous as the birth of a child was an act of hubris. In the first place, **Tessie didn't believe you could do it**. Even if you could, **she didn't believe you should try**.

Of course, a narrator in my position (prefetal at the time) can't be entirely sure about any of this. I can only explain the scientific mania that overtook my father during the spring of '59 as a symptom of the belief in progress that was infecting everyone back then. (Eugenides 9; my emphasis)

Regarding knowledge as a criterion for omniscience, the narrator appears to know more than the characters, understanding the underlying meaning of Tessie's sarcasm and beliefs, as my emphasis indicates. However, the narrative remains purely descriptive of these thoughts, conveyed through free indirect speech—which might cultivate the illusion of a focalising character, due to its blending of direct and indirect speech that allows the narrator to convey Tessie's thoughts or speech without quotation marks or explicit attribution—but remains nevertheless a non-focalised narrative. Instead of fully adopting Tessie's perspective to create internal focalisation or sharing his consciousness with her to form a more complex type of focalisation, the narrator conveys his mother's emotions without assuming her point of "seeing" the

narrated events. Instead, his own consciousness and overarching presence prevail, resulting in a non-focalised narrative that allows for a dynamic retrospective narration that reveals everything without, however, staying attached to a specific focalising character. This choice accounts for what the second passage claims, namely, that the narrator might not “be entirely sure about any of this” but is still able to tell his parents’ story.

However, the linearity of omniscience, of zero focalisation, is disrupted in the passages where a reference to Cal’s intersexuality occurs post-transition, when he evokes his pre-transition self. The first time in the narrative that this phenomenon is observed is during the description of Cal/lie’s intersexuality as a result of the “5-alpha-reductase deficiency syndrome”, where it is mentioned that “when Calliope surfaces, she does so like a childhood speech impediment. Suddenly there she is again, doing a hair flip, or checking her nails. It’s a little like being possessed. Callie rises up inside me, wearing my skin like a loose robe” (41-42). This shifting from first to third-person, as well as the employment of she/her pronouns when the narrator retrospectively refers to his younger, female-raised self, comprises one of the most intriguing narrative instances of narrative voice in *Middlesex*.

The utilisation of third-person grammar along with she/her pronouns increases as the story proceeds more and more closely to Callie’s experience of puberty. Callie’s transition—or rather, lack thereof—towards adolescence creates disruptions in the narrative linearity of the first person (masculine-gendered) grammar, as a sign of gradual dissociation towards her gendered self, as shown below:

Only Calliope, in the second row, is motionless, her desk stalled somehow, so that she's the only one who takes in the true extent of the metamorphoses around her. While solving proofs she is aware of Tricia Lamb's purse on the floor next to her desk, of the tampon she glimpsed inside it that morning – **which you use how, exactly? – and whom can she ask?** In the Christmas pageant, she is cast not as Mary as in past years but as an elf... **But there's still hope, isn't there?...** because the desks are flying, day after day; arranged in their squadron, the students bank and roar through time, so that Callie looks up from her ink-stained paper one afternoon and sees it is spring, flowers budding, forsythia in bloom, elms greenening; at recess girls and boys hold hands, kissing sometimes behind trees, and Calliope feels gyped, cheated. **"Remember me?" she says, to nature. "I'm waiting. I'm still here"**. (Eugenides 286; my emphasis)

In this passage, the emphasised words indicate narrative moments when focalisation is fixed on the adolescent Callie rather than on the adult narrator Cal. In these instances, the narrative is perceived—or “seen,” to borrow Genette's terminology—from Callie's perspective, but more importantly, the narrative consciousness is momentarily transferred to her. As Marie-Laure Ryan et al. argue in *Narrating Space/Spatializing Narrative: Where Narrative Theory and Geography Meet* (2016), the main difference between the narrative concept of perspective and focalisation lies in the type of positionality of the speaking and perceiving subject, respectively. In specific, “point of view stands for a purely spatial position from which a scene is observed (e.g., from above or below, from afar or close by)”, Ryan et al. explain, “while focalization suggests that the scene is inscribed in somebody's

consciousness” (20). In the passage above, it is not Cal’s consciousness that prevails in the emphasised phrases, but Callie’s consciousness towards her own feelings and thoughts at the moments, namely, of inquiry and unawareness (– **which you use how, exactly? – and whom can she ask?**), concern (**But there’s still hope, isn’t there?...**) and complaint (**“Remember me?” she says, to nature. “I’m waiting. I’m still here.”**) (Eugenides 286; my emphasis).

At the same time, the passage also reveals the knowledge and maturity of the adult narrator, Cal, through the use of advanced and sophisticated vocabulary (such as “the true extent of the metamorphoses around her”, and “the desks are flying, day after day; arranged in their squadron, the students bank and roar through time”), which serves to translate Callie’s feelings into compact and reflective notions (“feels gyped, cheated”). Put differently, the focalisation in the passage moves between the immediate experience of the young character, and the knowledge and reflection of the mature narrator—the consciousness of Callie and the consciousness of Cal. Additionally, the use of the word “feels”—delivered in the third person to characterise Callie’s emotions—underscores Cal’s narrative omniscience as a retrospective narrator, while also highlighting his detachment from his pre-transition self. This detachment is so profound that recalling these past feelings involves a process of dissociation, accounting for Callie’s consciousness to momentarily dominate to effectively illustrate the feelings of dysphoria that she feels toward her adolescent body, while simultaneously revealing Cal’s retrospective dysphoria toward Callie as the embodiment of those earlier, dysphoric feelings.

With regard to Callie's emotions, she does not experience the transition from childhood to adulthood in the same way as her non-intersex peers, as her secondary sex characteristics remain undeveloped due to her gender variance, rendering her embodied experience of adolescence alienating. She unconsciously perceives her body as "subaltern", to borrow Soheila Faghfori's reinterpretation of the term within the context of Eugenides' novel. Drawing on Antonio Gramsci's notion of "subalternity"—which refers not only to economic marginalisation but also to the forms of oppression embedded within cultural, political, and religious institutions—and Judith Butler's concept of "normalization", which describes how norms operate implicitly to render certain social practices standard or expected, Faghfori (2020) argues that Cal/lie's relationship to his/her intersex identity is shaped by the novel's hegemonic systems (102). These include structures such as Orthodox Christianity, the medical establishment (personified by figures like Dr. Luce) and also the broader pressures of societal and peer norms (108).

As a result, I argue that Cal/lie's alienation from the experience of a non-normative pubescent—and therefore "subaltern"—body is narratively expressed through shifts between the first person and a differently gendered third person, as well as through the establishment of a shared consciousness in terms of focalisation. The gender dysphoria that is narratively expressed here is twofold; it depicts Callie's dysphoria towards her "unnatural", non-normative body, and forty-one-year-old Cal's retrospective dysphoria and sense of disengagement from "the American girl [he] had once been" (Eugenides 529). Both emotive experiences are underlined by the shift in narrative discourse, echoing the detachment that Cal/lie experiences, as follows:

How **did Calliope** feel about **her crocus**? This is at once the easiest and the hardest thing to explain. [...] The crocus was part of **her body**, after all. There was no reason to ask questions. But there were times when **I felt** that something was different about the way **that I was made**. (330; my emphasis)

By the time school started, everyone at Baker & Inglis would know **Calliope Stephanides was a freak**. **I was waiting** for Jerome to jump up and run. **I felt** panicked and, at the same time, strangely calm. (376; my emphasis)

I looked at **my pretty hand** and then pulled it away and faced the word again. There it was, *monster*, in black and white, in a battered dictionary in a great library. [...] **Callie herself** was holding on to this chain now. **She** was tugging on it, winding it around **her hand** so that **her fingers** went white, as **she** stared down that word. *Monster*. (431; italics in original; my emphasis)

In these extracts, the way Calliope is referenced resembles how a distinct character would be described—corporeally and agentively differentiated from the narrator (specifically, the narrating subject “I”) as though they were two entirely separate entities. This narrative phenomenon generates a sense of alienation, producing a “state of displacement” (374) that mirrors the dual disconnection both Cal and Callie experience in relation to their pubescent and gender-nonconforming body. The focal point in those dysphoric and alienating instances is shaped accordingly: the formerly homogenous consciousness, which is normally fixed on the narrative present’s Cal, is now shared with Calliope.

The narrative becomes hybrid; it entails two genders in pronouns (masculine and feminine), two types of narrative (first and third-person) and two agents of shared

consciousness, two focalisers (Cal and Callie). The relationship between the two is forceful, reactive and in a constant struggle for dominance, as the textual proximity between the “I” and the “she” (“**Calliope Stephanides** was a freak. I was waiting [...]”) translates into a relationality of opposition (“The crocus was part of **her body**, after all. There was no reason to ask questions. But there were times when **I felt** [...]”). Consciousness, viewed in this manner, is not merely shared but contended for, with focalisation becoming a locus of simultaneous attachment and detachment, struggle and surrender, location and dislocation.

The uneven narrative dynamic is also identified by Chiara Pellegrini in her article “Declining to Describe: Intersex Narrators and Textual Visibility” (2022), where she interprets these narrative shifts as indicative of “a power imbalance” between Cal and Callie (47). Pellegrini observes that Cal’s omniscient narration can be read as a form of disembodiment, insofar as he consistently views events—and Callie herself—from a seemingly externalised point of view (“Declining to Describe” 46). Within this framework, Callie is perpetually on display, rendered visible and legible in ways that deny her subjectivity; “like a suspect text, Callie is not to be trusted” (Pellegrini, “Declining to Describe” 46). Furthermore, this textual visibility—this act of focalising Callie’s body through an ostensibly “objective” narrator—implicitly validates the equally “objective” authority of the fictional agents who interrogate and evaluate her body, while also positioning readers to adopt a similarly scrutinising perspective (46).

Pellegrini, additionally, contends that the disruption in narrative continuity (by means of narration and focalisation) “curtails Callie’s trans-inhabitation through eschewing focalisation from her and continually commenting on her thoughts and

actions, evaluating the extent to which they are signs of her ‘hidden’ masculinity” (*Trans Forms* 204). Pellegrini’s argument introduces a vital line of inquiry that expands how we narratologically think about focalisation, particularly in relation to the textual visibility of trans and gender-variant bodies. This involves not just how such bodies are represented—in terms of accurate representation, both medically, socially, politically, and otherwise, in ways that align with the lived realities of trans and intersex people—but more crucially, how they are textually manifested (for instance, whether they appear as focalised objects or as focalising subjects)—and what ethical implications arise from that inscription, particularly in texts authored by non-gender-variant writers.

Middlesex’s narrative hybridity is further amplified just before Callie starts identifying as Cal. While Tessie and Milton are getting informed about their daughter’s 5-alpha-reductase deficiency, the narrator says that “a single surgery and some injections would end the nightmare and give **my** parents back **their daughter, their Calliope**, intact” (Eugenides 429; my emphasis). The use of the possessive pronoun “my”, which is followed directly by the mentioning of Callie in the third person along with the possessive pronoun “their” and the gendered characterisation “daughter”, has a powerful effect on the narrative; it creates a chasm in the passage between Callie and Cal, between the two different types of consciousness. In other words, while Cal regards Tessie and Milton as *his* parents, *they* see *their daughter*, Calliope, as their only child. Their desire to have their daughter back “intact” contrasts with the fragmented nature of the passage narrating this instance, characterised by a dichotomy between Cal and Callie, which underscores the sense of detachment and alienation between

the two versions of Cal, before and after his transition, as well as the two different types of consciousness that are employed in the narrative.

Following this, the first time Cal is introduced into the narrative after fleeing home, his gender is depicted with deliberate ambiguity, subtly alluding to his coming out. The descriptors that are initially utilised to illustrate his presence at Ed's Barbershop are neither gender-bound (namely, "teenage kid, tall, stringy, and an odd mix if ever Ed saw one") nor in any way indicative of the homodiegetic narrator's inclusion in the discourse through first-person grammar (441). Contrarily, the narrative is conveyed in third-person, with mostly gender-neutral language. After a paragraph, the narrator properly introduces himself as "the easily rechristened Cal Stephanides, teen runaway", utilising almost exclusively first-person narration (441). Where female pronouns and third-person grammar are still used, it is so to evoke Cal's past self as the remains of his pre-transitional state, namely, before having his first gender-affirming haircut done, as shown here: "He turned me to face the mirror. And there **she** was, for the last time, in the silvered glass: **Calliope. She** still wasn't gone yet. **She** was like a captive spirit, peeking out" (442; my emphasis).

In addition, the narrator also addresses his newly coming-out self as "Cal" in the third person, not to evoke shame or dysphoria this time, but to introduce the emotive experience of novelty in discovering himself and his reclaimed embodied identity, as follows:

If I had doubts about my decision, if I sometimes thought about turning back, running back to my parents and the Clinic and giving in, what stopped me was this private ecstasy between my legs. I knew it would be taken from me. [...]

That was how Cal discovered himself, in voluptuous, liquid, sterile culmination, couchant upon two or three deformed pillows, with the shades drawn and the drained swimming pool outside and the cars passing, endlessly, all night. (453)

In this regard, focalisation is wavering between the novel consciousness of adolescent fugitive Cal towards his newly “discovered” body (“I knew it would be taken from me”)—right after he acknowledges his intersexuality and reclaims his gender— and the consciousness of the mature narrator Cal who translates his younger version’s sense of gender euphoria and sense of novelty into a sophisticated language (“what stopped me was this private ecstasy between my legs”, “in voluptuous, liquid, sterile culmination, couchant upon two or three deformed pillows”). Unlike the earlier narrative instance involving Cal and Callie, the narrative here gradually bridges the gap between the two time periods in the protagonist’s life, reconciling his sense of self with his gender expression.

Focalisation as Restriction of Information

Departing from Ryan’s definition of focalisation as consciousness and drawing from Niederhoff’s original definition, focalisation also denotes the restriction of information, specifically the level of access the narrator has or lacks to the characters’ inner worlds. Regarding the narrative present, the forty-year-old narrator is unable to access the emotions and thoughts of his love interest, Julie, rendering all associated passages externally focalised; all descriptions of Julie are based solely on external observations of her behaviours and actions, and on her explicitly stated opinions, as shown here:

Julie Kikuchi is thirty-six. She looks twenty-six. She is short without being small. **She is irreverent without being crude.** She used to see a therapist but stopped. **Her right hand is partly arthritic, from an elevator accident. This makes it painful to hold the camera for a long period.** “I need an assistant,” **she told me.** “Or a new hand.” [...] Julie told me a Barcelona story of getting locked in the Parque Guell with her boyfriend after visiting summoned. **Here it comes, I thought. The first ex-boyfriend had been summoned. Soon the rest would follow.** [...] I lack sufficient data. I don’t have it in quite the bulk a man of my years should have. Women sense this and a strange, questioning look comes into their eyes. [...] But that didn’t happen with Julie. [...]”. (Eugenides 166-167; my emphasis)

Unlike almost any other narrative instance in the novel, except for this one and another that I will discuss later in this section, the narrator is always able to access and deliver the characters’ thoughts. When it comes to Julie, however, he presents only what can be observed externally (“**She is irreverent without being crude**”), what is explicitly stated (“**Her right hand is partly arthritic from an elevator accident**”), or his own concerns (“**Here it comes, I thought. The first ex-boyfriend had been summoned. Soon the rest would follow**”). This authorial choice naturally aligns with the convention of retrospective narration; it would be implausible for a narrator who is also the protagonist to interact with someone while simultaneously conveying their inner thoughts and feelings, as if reading their mind.

Nevertheless, the rhetorical effect of said authorial choice in terms of focalisation is more interesting than it first appears. On one hand, external focalisation

fosters a sense of bonding with the reader and the narratee, as all narrative agencies (namely, the narrator-protagonist, the fictional recipient of Cal's biography, and the real-life reader of the novel) share a similar scope in the restriction of information. This allows the latter two to experience the narrator's relationship with Julie concurrently as it unfolds. On the other hand, and more significantly, I argue that Cal's inaccessibility to his love interest's inner realm may reflect his difficulty connecting with others, especially potential partners, due to his closeted intersex identity. Although he narrates not only his own story but also his family's portrait spanning two generations, which presupposes a certain degree of empathy and connection, he lacks the ability to connect with others through full disclosure of himself in his current lived experience and attachment (or rather, lack thereof) to his gender. Put differently, the restriction in the scope of information regarding the narrative present also serves as a textual manifestation of the emotional experience of his restricted, closeted self.

This constraint becomes evident in the narrative present and in relation to Julie, because the contrast between knowledge and ignorance is more pronounced than it was during the earlier years of the reclamation of his gender. The older Cal gets, the more difficult it becomes to hide: "It's getting harder all the time. With Olivia and every other woman who came after her, there has been this knowledge to deal with: the great fact of my condition. The *Obscure Object* and I met unawares, however, in blissful ignorance" (320). Unlike his younger, unaware-of-his-gender self, his current relationship with his gender is more fully realised, having lived more than "half his life as a male, and by now everything comes naturally" (41). This accentuates the contrast between his emotional withdrawal—and the resulting external focalisation concerning Julie—and his self-aware perspective regarding his sexuality and gender, which

nonetheless brings him the most shame in being himself. Therefore, the transition in focalisation in terms of the selection or restriction of narrative information from zero to external is tied to the narrator's awareness of and connection to his embodied sense of self, thereby engendering and reflecting his gradual internal withdrawal as a closeted intersex individual and his resulting withdrawal from intersex identity politics.

Cal's relationship with his gender entails a sense of shame about his intersexuality and refrains from being an active participant in intersex rights movements and associations, stating that "I live my own life and nurse my own wounds. It's not the best way to live. But it's the way I am" (106). In terms of gender expression, masculinity serves as his refuge. His masculine, "gym-built muscle body" (107) allows him to effortlessly pass as a man and express himself in the most convenient way, without revealing his intersexuality. He refers to his intersexual characteristics as "peculiarities," describing the process of connecting with his identity similar to the process of "wandering in the maze [...], shut away from sight" (107).

He avoids political discussions and demonstrations related to intersexual rights, driven by a fear "of becoming one of *them*", namely, the politically active intersex individuals, which leads to a detachment from his biological identity, allowing his masculine expression to mask his intersexuality (319; italics in original). This becomes particularly evident when Cal first starts identifying as male as well as using the men's bathrooms, contending the following:

And while the closeted, flatulent men showed no shame, at the urinals men acted nervous. They looked straight ahead like horses with blinders. I understood at those times what I was leaving behind: the solidarity of a shared

biology. Women know what it means to have a body. They understand its difficulties and frailties, its glories and pleasures. Men think their bodies are theirs alone. They tend them in private, even in public. (451-452)

By emphasising the sex he was assigned at birth as his “shared biology” with others, rather than acknowledging intersexuality as his shared biological identity, the narrator reinforces the gender binary framework instead of challenging it, thereby negating the biological validity of intersex identities as a distinct category outside of the binary. It is also noteworthy that this passage is focalised by the narrator in the narrative present, demonstrating zero focalisation rather than a fixed field of vision on his younger self. This narrative choice highlights forty-one-year-old Cal’s further retreat from his intersexuality since the expressed thoughts belong to him without the provision of the genuine thought process of his young, newly-out self. Adolescent Cal would hardly ever think in these terms or deeply consider the concept of “solidarity” in women’s circles. The bathroom experience that evokes the analogy with the horse (“[t]hey looked straight ahead like horses with blinders”) might belong to young Cal, as this is a thought process and visual image an adolescent could indeed create, yet the thoughts are actually those of the narrator (“the solidarity of a shared biology”). While he may claim that it was during “those times” that he realised “what he was leaving behind,” it would have been nearly impossible for a sixteen-year-old to conceptualise such a complex argument, which requires many years of lived experience instead of an on-the-spot epiphany.

As Hsu argues, Cal’s “stealth identity” has biopolitical extensions and implications, particularly realised through the intersection of gender and racial

assimilation; “stealth” is defined as “the term used by transgender and intersexed communities to describe individuals who do not publicly disclose the fact of their gender transition”, a choice that is deeply rooted in white privilege and passing (87-88). As Hsu notes, the narrative “portray[s] stealth as an alternative strategy for intersex survival” (93) and even positions Cal’s intersexuality as a potential threat to his “tenous material achievement” of being a white man, something that could be compromised “by evidence of his previous ethnic or gender affiliations (101). According to Hsu, what initially appears as masculinity through Callie is later developed into patriarchy through Cal’s timeline (101), particularly evident in the narrator’s concept of “The Man”, which suggests that a man who has transitioned must first assume the status of an alpha male, so to speak, to establish a male social position and ensure safety around other men (518).

Like Pellegrini and myself, Hsu also identifies the narrative split between Cal and Callie. While she doesn’t explicitly use the term “focalisation,” she refers instead to “narrative perspective”—not in a strictly narratological sense, but to describe how each version (past-Callie, present-Cal) of the protagonist engages with his/her identity. On one side, Callie’s refusal to conform to dominant norms—family expectations, Christianity, Greek heritage, and medical authority—is embodied in her decision to reject surgery. This act of resistance is closely tied to her queerness, both in her homosexuality and her non-cisgender, intersex identity. In contrast, Cal’s queerness becomes the central factor of his transition and his “stealth” masculine presentation: “Desire made me cross over to the other side, desire and the facticity of my body” (479), he says, framing desire as the catalyst for gender. From this perspective, hypermasculinity serves as both a rite of passage and a social role that Cal feels

compelled to perform—“even if [he doesn’t] want to” (518). In doing so, he ultimately reaffirms the very social constructivist ideas of gender that Callie resists (Hsu 101). As Hsu contends, “this tension between performative and essential notions of gender identity neatly encapsulates the difference between the novel’s two narrative perspectives”, while also suggesting that biopower operates at the formal level of the novel’s split narration (101).

Eugenides’ narrative directly associates gender transition with same-sex attraction, depicting the former as a mask and *pharmakon* (either cure or poison³⁷) for homoeroticism, as shown here:

Despite bigger problems, greater worries, it was heartbreak that seized me when I first saw my male face in the mirror. I thought: it’s over. By cutting off my hair I was punishing myself for loving someone so much. I was trying to be stronger. (445)

The dual sense of *pharmakon* seems pertinent here, as the protagonist’s transition is at the same time remedial (resulting in his passing as the opposite binary sex which in turn allows for his desired heterocanonical passing in social and romantic frames) and infecting (resulting in punishing the desire for same-sex attraction by altering the body’s perception and possibly chemistry to resemble the opposite binary sex). As a result, what Hsu describes as Cal’s “stealth survival strategy” becomes a secure heteromasculine alternative to living openly as an intersex individual (105).

³⁷ The ancient Greek word *pharmakon* (*φάρμακον*) has a dual meaning (in both ancient and, sometimes, modern Greek contexts), translating into both cure/remedy and poison depending on its linguistic and communicative context. One of the most well-known and influential interpretations and analyses of *pharmakon* and its dual nature is pursued by Jacques Derrida in “Plato’s Pharmacy”.

Circling back to the conception of focalisation as a restriction of information, the second significant narrative instance, which deviates from zero focalisation, employing an external focalised position that prevents the narrator from accessing the character's inner world, is related to Desdemona, particularly during her husband's funeral, as shown below:

Already latent inside me, [...] was the ability to communicate between the genders, to see not with the monovision of one sex but in the stereoscope of both. So that at the *makaria* after the funeral, I looked around the table at the Grecian Gardens and knew what everyone was feeling. **Milton [...]** worried that if he spoke he might start to cry [.] **Sourmelina was remembering** the day at Grand Trunk when she'd told Lefty that she would know his nose anywhere. [...] **[A]unt Zo was wishing** she had married someone like her father. The only one whose emotions I couldn't plumb was Desdemona. **Silently, in the window's position of honor at the head of the table, she picked at her whitefish and drank her glass of Mavrodaphne,** but her thoughts were as obscured to me as her face behind her black veil. (269; italics in original; my emphasis)

For the first time in the narrative, the narrator conveniently justifies his omniscience in a metafictional manner and demonstrates—as he delivers the narrative—the transition in focalisation from unfocalised narrative to externally focalised. This distinction, of course, is not merely accounted for by the narrator's overt explanation but is also illustrated in the emphasised passages. The verbs associated with the characters of Milton, Sourmelina, and Aunt Zoe describe inner processes such as worry, reminiscence, and wishful thinking, respectively, while the vocabulary related

to Desdemona is characterised solely by external descriptive language. The narrative focuses only on Desdemona's position at the table and her mannerisms regarding her food, without providing any internal or interpretive information based on these descriptions.

What is reflected here through this authorial choice of a restricted field of vision and restricted information access is Desdemona's emotive withdrawal during the ceremony, which is textually manifested as a withdrawal in the scope of information, namely, focalisation. Lefty's death constitutes such a disruptive moment in Desdemona's personal timeline, resulting in a narrative disruption of the otherwise linear and mostly uninterrupted unfocalised narrative. This becomes evident when, a few pages later, the narrator's ability to access Desdemona's thoughts and emotions returns, isolating (and, by extension, augmenting) the former narrative incident's significance. The narrative, then, reads: "As far as Desdemona was concerned, death was only another kind of immigration. Instead of sailing from Turkey to America, this time she would be travelling from earth to heaven, where Lefty had already gotten his citizenship and had a place waiting" (275). As Desdemona adapts to her new circumstances and begins to open up to her family and the world, the narrator's field of vision gradually expands again, regaining access to her inner thoughts and feelings.

Furthermore, through the manipulation of focalisation, Cal/lie's bond to his/her grandmother is brought to the fore, illustrating the relationship between nature and nurture, genealogy and socially determined identity. The following passage narrates Desdemona's view of herself in the bedroom mirror as she tries on the corset her mother had gifted her for her wedding night:

As she put it on, Desdemona felt as though she were spinning her own cocoon, awaiting metamorphosis. But when she looked in the mirror again, she caught herself. **It was no use. She would never get married. Lefty would come back tonight having chosen a bride, and then he would bring her home to live with them. Desdemona would stay where she was, clicking her beads and growing even older than she already felt.** A dog howled. Someone in the village kicked over a bundle of sticks and cursed. And my grandmother wept silently because she was going to spend the rest of her days counting worries that never went away. (36; my emphasis)

In the emphasised sentences, the narrator does not merely describe his grandmother's thoughts and anxieties, but momentarily shares his consciousness with her, thereby fleetingly assuming her position before returning to his unfocalised employment of narrative. Her worries about her future (**It was no use. She would never get married.**) are delivered in a plausible manner that resembles the experience, perception and thought process of young Desdemona. Here, the narrator transcribes those past experiences without interfering with the way that they were initially lived, allowing the narrative to waver between Desdemona's consciousness and the adult narrator's delivery and portrayal of said consciousness. Overall, this serves as a narrative manifestation of Cal's assertion that "when [he] speak[s], Desdemona speaks, too. She's writing these words now" (38).

Parallel Temporalities: Gendered and Personal Timelines

Cal/lie's and Desdemona's connection is thematically highlighted through their reversely mutual experience of their gendered embodiment growing up, their

womanhood. In the following section, I analyse how Cal/lie's and Desdemona's contiguous timelines subvert chronological linearity by different means, highlighting various life transitions, to illustrate the connection between the novel's content and its form. In other words, I aim to show how the transitional thematic processes in the characters' timelines, particularly regarding gender and womanhood, lead to and account for the previously discussed shifts in focalisation.

To begin with, both Callie and Desdemona's personal experience of adulting can be characterised as unconventional, for different reasons and in different historical and social contexts. Callie's childhood—unlike Desdemona's, which I will discuss shortly—is represented as conventional, with no apparent signs of gender nonconformity prior to puberty; the feeling of physical stagnation is centred on Callie's adolescence. At twelve years old, waiting to experience her own "transformation" of a further developed body, she feels "left behind, left out" (285). Her embodied temporality is paused on her, without being able to acknowledge that such a lack of normative biological linearity is related to her intersexuality and is, thus, an inherent part of her biology. From that point, the protagonist embodies a different timeline and an ostensibly much slower pace of "growing up". The unavoidable comparison to others, mainly girls, evokes "a bundle of emotions: envy, certainly, but also disdain. Inferiority and superiority at once. Above all, [...] panic" (Eugenides 297).

This can also be viewed through the lens of queer experience with regard to non-normative, queer time and its opposition to heterotemporality. By "queer time", I refer to Judith Halberstam's (2007) conception of an alternative temporality—one that departs from the normative life trajectory of "adolescence – early adulthood –

marriage – reproduction – child rearing – retirement – death,” and instead embraces “the dark nightclub, the perverse turn away from narrative coherence” of the previous sequence, favoring “late childhood in place of early adulthood or immaturity in place of responsibility” (“Theorizing Queer Temporalities” 182). Queer lives most often follow a temporal path different from the presumed one, which is constructed around socially normative concepts of marriage, family creation and, most significantly, what Lee Edelman (2004) calls “reproductive futurism”—the belief that participation in politics is heavily informed by the desire to create a better future for one’s children (2-3). The notion of adulting, in conventional non-queer terms, entails a sense of encompassing self-awareness and linearity, a gradual emotive maturation and progressive completeness; non-queer time is always forward-looking and forward-leaning. However, for the majority of queer individuals, adulting is neither self-evident nor value-neutral.

The milestones that are integrated into non-straight lives are often comprised of many re-evaluations, re-definitions, re-clamations, re-locations and instances of “feeling backward”—to briefly echo Heather Love’s influential work *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (2007). In this context, all feelings that young Callie experiences resemble the self-consciousness and fear of missing out compared to the timeline of non-queer individuals. Callie’s sense of being “left behind, left out” (Eugenides 285) can thus be reinterpreted through a queer lens—as an alternative, non-linear way of living. As Nguyen Tan Hoang (2007) proposes, rather than viewing belatedness as a sign of “arrested development or lack of responsibility,” we might instead understand it as a movement “out of the mainstream and into the margins” (“Theorizing Queer Temporalities” 183).

Moreover, I argue that queer temporality is also reflected on the level of the narrative discourse by means of the novel's continuous anachronies and the formation of a non-linear narration. Although the novel ends with Cal attending his father's funeral, the events that occur chronologically after this moment are narrated from the retrospective present in Berlin, where Cal is reflecting back on his and his family's life. This feeling of travelling back and forth in time in order to follow Cal's story in Berlin functions as the narrative manifestation of the non-canonical queer temporality, in that it echoes the various moments of reclamation, re-identification and metaphorical relocation entailed in queer experience and timeline. Cal/lie's story is narrated in a neither linear nor chronological way, but rather through a(n) (a)temporal logic that does not conform to any presumed expectations on how intersex and queer lives should be lived and, by extension, narrated.

"To live is to fail, to bungle, to disappoint" Jack Halberstam (2011) contends, arguing that "[t]he queer art of failure involves the acceptance of the finite" and the embracing of "endings and limits" which result in the "revel [...] of our own inevitable fantastic failures" (*The Queer Art of Failure* 186-187). The protagonist's journey illustrates the multilayered essence of queer living along with its various "failures", namely, its non-normative and non-conforming moments of re-consideration and reclamation as well as of trials and errors that this process of metaphorical queer relocation across time entails. The lack of linearity and structure in the queer experience is narratively manifested in *Middlesex* by virtue of the non-linear narration of the temporal relocation—back and forth—in the narrative. Put differently, the anachronies of Eugenides' narrative can be perceived as "failures" of normative temporality yet as deictics of an autonomous queer timeline.

“But now, at the age of forty-one, I feel another birth coming on” mentions the narrator/protagonist from the very first page of the novel, referring to another milestone in his personal history that is ready to be met: that of another coming out, of another “birth” (Eugenides 3). This time, the narrator comes out as an intersex individual to his narratees, to the figurative/fictional readers that read his autobiography and discover his and his family’s life story and background. At the same time, his public coming out almost coincides with his coming out to Julie, which is mentioned in the novel’s last chapter, and which comprises a pivotal moment in his own personal timeline.

Cal experiences his first serious romantic relationship in his forties, living openly as an intersex, heteromasculine individual, whose inability to have children has influenced his decision not to marry. At the time of narration, he resides in Berlin’s Schöneberg district and works for the Foreign Department. Notably, he admits—tinged with shame—that his choice to join the Foreign Service stemmed from a desire to avoid settling down (106). Once again, Cal’s life unfolds along a timeline that subverts normative expectations, shaped by the specificities of his circumstances and echoing the non-linear trajectory of his earlier, female-raised self. As previously discussed, Cal’s racial and gendered privileges—particularly his ability to pass as a white, heterosexual, cisgender man—have undeniably improved his quality of life. However, his intersex identity, and the rigid societal expectations surrounding gender, continue to influence his life choices, underscoring how his personal timeline is deeply contextual and contingent upon his gendered experience.

Beyond the experience of non-normative growing up and adulthood often associated with queer individuals in contrast to heteronormative timelines, intersex people also engage with temporality in ways that are deeply shaped by the medical system. Fae Garland and Mitchell Travis, in *Temporal Bodies: Emergencies, Emergence, and Intersex Embodiment* (2020), raise the critical issue of early medical intervention in intersex infants, and examine the ways that the healthcare system “uses temporality and particularly the concept of emergency to further evade present and future processes of external scrutiny that challenges its medical power/knowledge” (120). Garland and Travis argue that intersex embodiment is often framed as an “emergency”,³⁸ creating a sense of urgency that not only justifies but actively necessitates medical intervention, typically within the first year of the child’s life (120–121). By framing the intersex body as a medical emergency, healthcare professionals present immediate intervention as the only viable option to the parents of intersex infants. This sense of urgency often positions anatomical variations—frequently perceived as “anomalies” of “normative” anatomy—as conditions that must be swiftly “corrected,” leaving little to no space for parents to consider the ethical or long-term medical or psychological implications of such decisions.

Among the proposals Garland and Travis put forward is a shift in the temporality of the medical gaze—one that centres the intersex body not solely in its

³⁸ For an analysis of the concept of emergency in relation to intersex bodies as represented on screen, see chapter six of Viola Amato’s *Intersex Narratives: Shifts in the Representation of Intersex Lives in North American Literature and Popular Culture* (241–294). In this chapter, Amato also explores how Jeffrey Eugenides’ *Middlesex* probably influenced the creators of two prominent medical television series to develop episodes centred on “an intersex case”, after the novel’s popularity (246). Amato reflects on how *Middlesex* has shaped popular cultural narratives surrounding intersex bodies, contending that “the reproduction of knowledge about intersex thus has a circular and cross-referential quality” (246).

present state, but more significantly in its futurity, understanding the now-infant as the adult they will become. Additionally, Garland and Travis advocate for the concept of “deferability”, “as an important new component of best interests assessments that assess institutional accounts of temporality allowing for delineation between emergencies and non-emergencies without relying upon more loaded and ambiguous terms such as ‘necessity’” (136). By incorporating this criterion, medical care is encouraged to view the intersex body not as an emergency—often more socially constructed than medically urgent—but as *emergent*, understood across a lifetime rather than in the present moment (Garland and Travis 142).

The reality of the medical field towards intersex individuals is also reflected in the novel, when Callie and her parents visit Dr Peter Luce’s “Sexual Disorders and Gender Identity Clinic”. Callie undergoes a series of evaluations, both physical and psychological, at times under the scope of many people at once who describe her as a “fascinating case” and “a very rare condition” (Eugenides 421). These scenes underscore the violence of the medical system toward intersex individuals, making them feel like “living experiment[s]” (408). The pressure placed on intersex children to “grow up” prematurely in response to invasive and often traumatising medical consultations and procedures reflects a harsh and non-linear model of maturation—one that most non-intersex, non-queer children are not forced to experience. For Callie, the clinical examinations and the proposed corrective surgery—framed as a way to make her “better,” as her father suggests, echoing Garland and Travis’s notion of the intersex body as an emergency—prove deeply traumatic, ultimately leading her to run away and break ties with her family.

Much like the temporal framing of intersex bodies personified through Callie in the novel, I argue that the senior body is also shaped by temporal narratives imposed by others—albeit to a different extent and with distinct implications. This creates a compelling parallel between the temporalities of Callie and Desdemona, highlighting the narrative significance of their relationship through focalisation. I specifically argue that the concept of “emergency” that is bound to intersex individuals, mirrors that of “imminence” that is bound to the elderly. As Yohko Tsuji illustrates in her article “Time is not up: Temporal complexity of older Americans’ lives” (2005), elderly individuals are usually imposed pastness as “[o]ne commonly assumed strategy is to live in the past” (4), even though older American’s relationship with time is more complex than “the linear model of time prescribes” and naturally non-homogenous across all people (7). The usual discourse around the elderly is centred on the “imminence of death”, where the body is viewed as in a constant decline, moving towards the irrevocable end (Tsuji 8). At the same time, older Americans, argues Tsuji, seem to “try to create a temporally static world”, feeling that if they show that they become acceptant of death “[i]n accordance with youth-oriented American culture”, they fail (11).

Desdemona's relationship to time and ageing undergoes a profound shift following her husband’s death. Even a decade before her own passing, she expresses a readiness to die, stating at Lefty’s memorial service that she is prepared to be “taken.” Feeling “tired of living”, she asks Callie to pray for her to die and “go be with *papou*”, framing death as another form of emigration or relocation (Eugenides 271-275; italics in original). “The death of a spouse is a common trauma among the elderly”, notes Tsuji, “divid[ing] time into two parts: before and after the incident” (11). For Desdemona, existence becomes burdensome, and aging—rather than something

to fear—emerges as a welcome progression toward death. Unlike many older Americans who attempt to pause the passage of time, fearing that embracing it would signify failure (Tsuji 11), Desdemona not only doesn't fear ageing and death, but actively welcomes them. Much like Callie, who experiences a sense of physiological stagnation just before puberty—wishing time would accelerate so she can catch up with her peers—Desdemona undergoes a similar sense of inertia, though from the opposite end of life. While Callie yearns to grow up, mature, and undergo a bodily transformation as a kind of relocation of self, her grandmother longs for time to move swiftly toward death, viewing it as a reunion with her late husband and a different kind of emigration. Both characters, in their own ways, conceptualise time as a pathway to transformation and movement—whether toward life or its closure.

Another parallel between Callie's and Desdemona's relationship to temporality lies in their embodied experience of womanhood, with Callie's journey mirroring that of Desdemona in *Bithynios*—but in reverse. Desdemona's alienation and shame toward her body stem from her extremely feminine and extenuated figure, while adolescent Callie's similar feelings arise from the absence of these characteristics. The normative physical changes of puberty that are associated with non-gender variant bodies have not yet occurred for Callie, leaving her feeling inadequate and ashamed of her flat chest, short height, and lack of menstruation. In contrast, her body begins to change in ways that do not resemble those of a young girl, as if "a Dionysian element stole over [her] features" (294). These "Dionysian" characteristics, linked to her intersexuality, foreshadow the features of Cal in the narrative present: arched brows, arched nose, and so on. Callie's pubescent body starts to change, acquiring a sense of androgyny and developing masculinity, deviating from

the ideal embodiment of womanhood that her grandmother seems to have, corporeally rather than mentally or psychologically, experienced.

Similar to Callie, Desdemona experiences disappointment in her relationship with her body as well as a sense of detachment and embarrassment towards her womanhood. The following passages resonate strongly with and mirror each other, reflecting feelings of being left behind in life, forgotten, and alienated from one's own body and mind, as well as from one's peers:

Desdemona, however, mourning her parents, was still imprisoned by the past.

And so she stood on the mountain, looking down at the emancipated city, and **felt cheated** by her inability to feel happy **like everyone else**. (21; my emphasis)

Only Calliope, in the second row, is motionless, her desk stalled somehow, so that **she's the only one** who takes in the true extent of the metamorphoses around her. [...] [A]nd Calliope **feels gyped, cheated**. "Remember me?" she says, to nature. "I'm waiting. I'm still here." (286; my emphasis)

Both excerpts highlight a shared feeling of isolation and betrayal, marked by a sense of being "cheated" and the unfulfilled promise of what life was expected to offer; for Callie, it is the lost promise of a normative physical maturity, whereas for Desdemona it is the lost promise of a normative emotive connection to herself. They both long for regularity, yet both—for different reasons and due to different contextual resistances—cannot conform to "normalcy". At twenty-one, Desdemona is embarrassed about her "voluptuous figure", about how her body is "always announcing itself in ways she didn't sanction" and how her "feminine elaborations escap[e] the constraints of her drab, confining clothes" (24). She is "looking slightly

scandalized at what her breasts and hips [are] up to” (24). In contrast to her mature figure, her face is pale, her complexion dimly lit, and her eyes big yet melancholic. Along with shame, Desdemona also experiences a sense of estrangement, a lack of connection towards her corporeal self and its inability to yet experience desire, rendering her “body [...] still [a] stranger to its owner” (26).

Finally, I argue that all of the above converges in the narrative moment when Desdemona reveals to Cal her relationship with her brother—a disclosure that also accounts for Cal/lie’s genetic mutation. The previously discussed moments of temporal contiguity in the experience and embodiment of time between the two family members—narratively conveyed through focalisation—heighten the significance of this scene, ultimately relocating the protagonist’s intersexuality within a web of temporal and cultural relationships across time. This narrative incident accords great significance to and is signified by the binary between knowledge and ignorance; Cal’s unawareness of his family’s real story (and, by extension, of his own genetic condition’s background) becomes tangent to Desdemona’s awareness and confessing of it, which is ironically reframed by her lack of memory and cognitive sharpness.

Cal’s ignorance transitions into knowledge only during Desdemona’s very end, when she barely recalls anyone and anything, but is capable of telling the truth. In fact, what appears to be the early stages of dementia can be seen as a form of relocation in a dual sense; Eva Adelseck, influenced by Susan Sontag’s *Illness as Metaphor*, suggests that dementia can be interpreted as “the idea of one-way travelling”,³⁹ representing a

³⁹ Eva Adelseck, “Losing One’s Self: The Depiction of Female Dementia Sufferers in *Iris* (2001) and *The Iron Lady* (2011)” (41-54).

final relocation (45). This concept also aligns with Desdemona's view of death as another form of emigration. When Desdemona, now bedridden, reveals the truth to Cal, she provides him with a way to situate his intersexuality within the context of family history—linking his identity to familial relationships that spanned across decades, countries, and continents.

Through the relocating of Cal's intersexuality in the context of familial relationships before the family's dislocation from Asia Minor and their relocation to the US, notions such as ancestral and transgenerational (hi)story are utilised as rhetorical means of significance regarding the formation of identity. Put differently, in the words of Banner, "by situating the gene as a new way to tell a family story, Eugenides highlights the gene's rhetorical function" (850). The narrative situates intersexuality within a broader historical and cultural discourse and tradition that blends nature and nurture, genetic and environmental factors. The layering of temporalities, locations and cultures complicates, while at the same time enriching the narrative, rendering the journey of self-discovery multifaceted and multigenerational.

The Rhetoric of Genetics

As has already become evident, the narrative's rhetorical dynamic is deeply shaped by the intersection of dis-/re-location and gender—particularly through the lenses of race and intersexuality. The protagonist's intersex identity is intricately entwined with his Greekness, not only in terms of ethnicity and racial positioning, but also through the symbolic and cultural frameworks of ancient Greek mythology and literature. As Hsu has noted, "[e]ven [Cal's] self-appellation, *hermaphrodite*, obscures the intersection of race and intersex in the novel by locating the latter's origin in Cal's

ethnicity and the mythology of Asia Minor” (88). Hsu approaches *Middlesex* from a biopolitical standpoint, namely, through the lens of the interplay between hegemonic sociopolitical forces and the intersex subject’s body and life, focusing on how “ethnicity ultimately serves a biometric function by measuring and mediating biopower’s effects on the multiple-border crossing body” (89). She accords significance to how the novel’s “narrative technologies [produce] the exceptionality of Cal’s position”, resulting in the intersex body’s normalisation and erasure (92). One of these technologies, according to Hsu, is the authorial language that links ethnicity with gender, perpetually positioning the former as the determinant of the latter. According to Eugenides,⁴⁰ the use of the outdated term “hermaphrodite” is very much intentional as it directly associates biological embodied identity with Greek history and mythology, thereby creating a genealogy of rhetoric about identity formation.

From Tiresias and the Minotaur to Hermaphroditus, the intersex subject in *Middlesex* is interpreted through symbols of classical antiquity and viewed as complex as the Greek mythical figures with heterogeneous bodies, historically characterised by their erotic otherness. Tiresias is primarily known for his metamorphosis by Hera, who punished him by changing his sex, causing him to live as a female for several years and even start a family. One of the most famous aspects of the Tiresias myth is his recognition of the intensity of the female orgasm, after Hera and Zeus asked him to compare sexual pleasure between the sexes, having experienced both. As for Minotaur, he was the offspring of Crete’s queen Pasiphaë, who was also punished by a god, Poseidon, after her husband, Minos, refused to offer him a bull as a sacrifice. As

⁴⁰ Interview with Oprah Winfrey, “A Conversation with Jeffrey Eugenides”, Oprah.com.

a consequence, Poseidon made the queen fall in love with the bull, resulting in the birth of the Minotaur. Lastly, Hermaphroditus, the child of Hermes and Aphrodite, was fused with the nymph Salmacis after she attempted to seduce him and asked the gods to never separate them. The gods granted her wish, merging their bodies into one of both sexes, thus creating Hermaphroditus. These mythical representations of heterogeneous embodied experiences do not accurately or sufficiently reflect intersex intelligibility, rather, as Viola Amato notes in *Intersex Narratives: Shifts in the Representation of Intersex Lives in North American Literature and Popular Culture*, “[i]ntersex intelligibility is, yet again, displaced outside the realm of possible” (182).

Specifically, I argue that the impossibility of intersex intelligibility, which is rhetorically foregrounded by means of mythological, genetic and medical discourses in the novel, is reflected in focalisation, which reveals another impossibility—on the level of the discourse. Therefore, I argue that focalisation can be read as the key “narrative technology”, to borrow Hsu’s term (96), that produces the intelligibility of intersex identity and permits the reader to understand intersex embodiment in this particular manner. As Kaspar Villadsen (2024) argues, Michel Foucault’s concept of technology designates “a system of techniques and practices, emphasizing that technology is a response to urgent needs and social struggle” (32). In *Middlesex*, the narrative technology of focalisation takes on various narrative modes and functions—including omniscience, non-focal narration, and both external and internal focalisation—which serve to illuminate the novel’s central themes: gender dysphoria, transition, self-acceptance, the tension between queer and heteronormative timelines, and the trauma of medical abuse.

Similar to Foucault's original concept of technologies—which “produce a particular knowledge, and they interplay with other technologies” (Villadsen 36)—the technology of focalisation contributes to the production of intersex intelligibility by interfacing with systems such as medicine, religion, and culture. These systems function as what Foucault terms “technologies of power”, which “determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination, an objectivizing of the subject” (“Technologies of the Self” 18). Subsequently, drawing from Amato's argument that “[i]ntersex intelligibility is, yet again, displaced outside the realm of possible” (182), I argue that the impossibility of intersex intelligibility in Eugenides' novel is reflected in and textually constructed by the narrative impossibility by means of focalisation. By “narrative impossibility”, I refer to how narrative structures—particularly focalisation—operate in ways that render the impossible possible, often at the expense of the intersex subject.

Firstly, the narrative impossibility lies in the narrator's omniscience throughout the narrative, even as a “prefetal narrator” (Eugenides 9), which derives from his ability to “communicate between the genders, to see not with the monovision of one sex but in the stereoscope of both” (269). The authorial decision to employ a first-person narrative—evoking both a fictional autobiography and a bildungsroman—while simultaneously relying on predominantly omniscient narration, creates the impression that the intersex narrator transcends the boundaries of human subjectivity. He appears less like a person and more like a superhuman figure: omnipresent even in a “prefetal” state, and capable of accessing the thoughts and experiences of characters who lived long before his birth. In addition, the notion that he can “communicate between the genders” evokes Tiresias and his famed embodiment of both sexes, which

led Zeus to ask him which gender experiences greater sexual pleasure—further situating intersexuality within the realm of the mythical and the impossible.

At the same time, said impossibility is also situated in the sharing of consciousness between Callie and Cal or Cal/lie and Desdemona. In the same way that the narrative wavers between Callie's and Desdemona's experience and narrator's portrayal of it, transforming between different fields of vision and different types of consciousness, the intersex protagonist is found between ethnicities (Greek and American), discourses (medical, genetic, mythological), regions (Smyrna and Michigan) and periods (20th and 21st century). Similar to the travelling chromosome that causes Cal's 5-alpha-reductase deficiency, intersexuality constitutes a metaphorical locus of dislocation and relocation, of different identities and genetic (hi)stories through time.

Sing now, O Muse, of the recessive mutation of the fifth chromosome! Sing how it bloomed two and a half centuries ago on the slopes of Mount Olympus, while the goats bleated and the olives dropped. Sing how it passed down through nine generations, gathering invisibly within the polluted pool of the Stephanides family. And sing how Providence, in the guise of a massacre, sent the gene flying again; how it blew like a seed across the sea to America, where it drifted through out industrial rains until it fell to earth in the fertile soil of my mother's own midwestern womb. Sorry if I get a little Homeric at times. That's genetic, too. (4)

Finally, I argue that, in the same way that focalisation serves as "a visual metaphor for determining the source of fictional knowledge" (Fludernik, "New Wine in Old Bottles?" 635), intersex identity in the novel both functions and is treated as a

metaphor for exploring the interplay between nature and nurture through the process of dislocation and relocation. As Olivia Banner (2010) argues, it is by virtue of “the iconicity of the gene and gene discourse [which] becomes imbued with a rhetoricity, textuality, and narrativity” that both “family history (the ethnic immigrant saga) and [...] intersex identity” are figured in the novel (850-851). Focalisation serves as the central structural device that enables what Banner describes as “[t]he ironic, playful mode through which the novel describes genetic discourse [and which] ensures that it remains slippery, a site of rhetorical constructions that can be molded and bent to fit different situations” (851). It is precisely this “slippery nature” of intersexuality—mediated through genetic discourse and figured as a flexible, rhetorically constructed site rather than a material, lived experience—that contributes to the displacement of intersex intelligibility “outside the realm of possible” (Amato 182).

Conclusions

My central argument in this chapter has been that the dialogic relationship between narrative form and narrated content—and, more specifically, a kind of formalism rooted in structural analysis yet deeply attuned to gender- and queer-conscious significations—is exemplified in the co-constitutive relationship between focalisation and intersex intelligibility. I have demonstrated that the novel’s “intersex intelligibility” (Amato 182), or rather its absence, is narratively manifested as a form of what I term “narrative impossibility” through focalisation. At the same time, the very impossibility that focalisation stages—by making the impossible narratively possible via zero focalisation—ultimately operates at the expense of the intersex subject, as it “displac[es] [its intelligibility] outside the realm of possible” (Amato 182).

Moreover, from the perspective of contextual narratology, I have demonstrated how focalisation adopts multiple modes to produce layered gender-related significations. It functions, first, as a form of consciousness, contested between the adult narrator and his pre-transition self, thereby exposing a dual experience of gender dysphoria. It also operates as a narrative source of information that reveals the narrator's "stealth identity" (Hsu 87), his estrangement toward his intersex embodiment, his emotional withdrawal from others, and his affective alignment with his grandmother—while also underscoring the tension between queer and heteronormative temporalities. Additionally, focalisation renders genetic discourse "slippery" and "a site of rhetorical constructions" (Banner 851), which in turn allows for an equally "slippery" representation of intersex identity—one that resists "taking shape" (Fawaz 54) and, instead, foregrounds its narrative and rhetorical construction over any grounding in lived experience.

Chapter Four

“Escalators are for them”: Thematizing Space in *Disoriental* (2018) by Négar Djavadi

Introduction

It is widely recognised among narrative theorists, including those discussed in this chapter, that the concept of narrative space remains significantly understudied compared to the concept of, for instance, narrative time. Despite the humanities’ shift towards other disciplines in the 1980s, including the narrative turn from classical to contextual and postclassical narratology, the study of space has remained undertheorised. Although notable structuralists and classical narratologists have examined spatial representation,⁴¹ only a few, whom I will address and draw from in my analysis, have focused specifically on the physical aspect of space as setting, rather than its metaphorical and/or symbolic dimension.

In this chapter of my thesis, I am looking at the notion of transformation through the lens of dis/relocation, of perpetual movement, in relation to Négar Djavadi’s novel *Disoriental*. *Disoriental* was written in French, originally published in 2016, and translated into English by Tina Kovak for Europa Editions two years later. The existing bibliography on the novel is notably limited, with the majority of published scholarship concentrating primarily on postcolonial and queer studies. My aim in this chapter is to position Djavadi’s novel within the framework of contextual narratology

⁴¹ Such as Roland Barthes in “Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative”; Tzvetan Todorov in *Grammaire du Décameron*; Seymour Chatman in *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*; Gérard Genette in *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*; Mieke Bal in *Narratology*—as well as more recent contributions like David Herman’s *Story Logic: Problems and Possibilities of Narrative*; Katrin Dennerlein’s *Narratologie des Raume*; James Phelan, Peter J. Rabinowitz, Robyn Warhol, David Herman, and Brian Richardson’s “Narrative Worlds: Space, Setting, and Perspective”.

and offer a formalist perspective on the formation and signification of exile subjectivity, queerness, and otherness. In the section that follows, I will identify scholars whose research parallels my own, and will then discuss the unique contribution that my work brings to these ongoing scholarly conversations.

Firstly, May Ngo, in “*Disoriental* and the Dichotomies of Diaspora” (2021), studies the relationship between the novel’s form and content focusing on the ways that the novel’s fragmented structure (i.e. non-linear narration) and various interdisciplinary narrative techniques (e.g. the collage and montage) reflect the diasporic and multi-layered immigrant experience. Cameron Fae Bushnell, in “Orientalism Otherwise: A Poetics of Adjacency in Négar Djavadi’s *Disoriental*” (2022), delves into how the novel’s formal structures, alongside its musical and cinematic elements, “undermine [its] hierarchies [...], creating an orientalism from a disorientalized orient” (512). The quest for a definitive destination, or “home,” encompasses personal experiences relating to alternatives for home, sexual identity, and various ways of engaging with the world (506). By examining the novel’s diverse recontextualisations of the Orient through the lens of adjacency, Bushnell highlights the opposing or comparable thematic and structural elements that coexist in Djavadi’s narrative, contributing to the formation of the female exile identity.

More recently, Jasmine Cooper in “Queer, Migrant Non-Parenthood in *Désorientale* by Négar Djavadi and *Gabrielle* by Agnès Vannouvong” (2024) attends to the ways that the idealised reproductive body is depicted and more so challenged in the novel, as well as the ways that the novel’s queerness underpins not only its content but also its formal structure due to its non-linear narrative logic. Cooper draws from a

handful of important queer and feminist theorists such as Judith Butler, Sara Ahmed, Lee Edelman and Jack Halberstam to talk about queer form and temporality, and additionally interprets the fertility clinic narrative as a “topos marked by a complex web of micro- and macro-vulnerabilities” associated with the queer migrant body” (6).

My research follows a similar path, investigating the intricate interplay between narrative form and content within the novel, emphasising the ways in which these elements share a dialogic relationship. However, my aim is to highlight how using a narratological approach that emphasises gender-conscious significations can effectively illuminate the complex thematic and structural elements of the novel, with gender serving as the conduit for this dynamic. In different ways, while Ngo, Bushnell and Cooper, examine and interpret narrative form as queer form (namely, through the lens of queerness)—each contributing uniquely to this discourse—I, instead, argue that the exile subjectivity in *Disoriental* is “taking shape” (Fawaz 54) by quite literally—and politically—*taking up space*. In other words, I approach narrative form through the concept of narrative space, as a site—both geographical and linguistic—of multiple transitions, tensions, and intersections, revealed through the characters’ positionality, or their lack thereof, within particular spaces.

Specifically, I argue that Djavadi constructs a complex topoanalysis through the memories of her protagonist, whose narrative retrospectively reconstructs the lives of her family members by localising and conceptualising them in their respective spaces. The relationship between the analysis of space and the analysis of character is interilluminating and interdependent in the novel, as both types of representations echo one another. Furthermore, I look at the concept of disorientation with a focus on

the dual significance it holds for the disoriental individual, in that disorientation is presented in the narrative as a result of the subject's departure from the Orient (dislocation) and the embodiment of a new identity in an alternative orient (relocation). To interrogate this, I draw from Edward Said's study on "Orientalism" (1977)⁴² to shed light on Djavadi's dual conception of the Orient, both as "an imaginative geography" and as "a geographical, cultural, linguistic and ethnic unit" (Said, "ORIENTALISM*" 162). Simultaneously, I argue that the subject's relationship to her gender embodies a metaphorical conception of space, serving as both a refuge and an exile for the protagonist.

Moreover, I examine the connection between belonging and translating into other cultural codes, a relationship which is situated in both linguistic and geographical locations, highlighting the complexity of the subject's disorienting and transformative experience in more than just one dimension. I argue that space serves as an active agent of narrative processing that is thematised differently to foreground the various intersections of exile identity, and that gender constitutes the space towards which the protagonist is always oriented, rendering both a self-exile and a homeland. Finally, I draw from Michel Foucault's concept of "heterotopia" to illustrate how the space of the fertility clinic, when interpreted as a heterotopic site, serves as the narrative's connective tissue, uniting the story's juxtaposed elements. In the same regard, I also approach the protagonist's body as a metaphorically heterotopic space, functioning as

⁴² In his book of the same name, published in 1978, a year after his corresponding article, Edward Said defines "Orientalism" as the "*distribution* of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological texts; it is an *elaboration* not only of a basic geographical distinction (the world is made by two unequal halves, Orient and Occident) but also of a whole series of "interests" which, by such means as scholarly discovery, philological reconstruction, psychological analysis, landscape and sociological description, it not only creates but also maintains" (12; italics in original).

a frame for her identity. In doing so, I designate the connection between heterotopia and marginalised subjectivity, emphasising how lived experiences are localised in the body of the exile individual.

Departing from Marie-Laure Ryan, Keneth Foote and Maoz Azaryahu's book *Narrating Space/Spatializing Narrative: Where Narrative Theory and Geography Meet* (2016), I approach the notion of transition in its geographical sense from a narratological standpoint. The term "geographical" designates the study of places and the relationship between individuals and their environment, while the term "narratological" designates the approach that centres space as a formal category of the narrative discourse that carries meaning and significance for the storyworld. By exploring how space influences the protagonist's identity through her connections to various environments and her family's dis/relocations, I aim to foreground the continuity and interdependence between two primary dimensions of transformation in the text: the narrative discourse (form) and the narrated story (content).

Theorising Space

In their book-length study, *Narrating Space/Spatializing Narrative: Where Narrative Theory and Geography Meet* (2016), Marie-Laure Ryan et al. capture the shift in narratology towards geography to study space and place more expansively across different media under the lens of geography. They pursue this objective through two distinct approaches: the spatialisation of narrative and the narrativisation of space. As narrative space, Ryan et al. consider "the physical environment in which the characters of narrative live and move" (3). In conceptualising narrative space, Ryan et al. view it as an integral feature of plot, asserting that plot is essentially the crossing of

various events or semantic borders (36). Thus, space can be interpreted both literally and metaphorically, depending on the degree of “spatial concretization” the narrative demonstrates: “When spatial concretization [...] does not [take place], the idea of crossing becomes a metaphor so thin that one might just as well replace it with a “change of state” or “switch of value of a semantic feature” (Ryan et al. 37). Space signifies plot in a dual sense, by creating a sense of structural organisation, however imperceptible it may be.

Ryan et al. particularly underline the interilluminating relationship between geography and narratology, stating that “[g]eography provides narratology not only with the concepts of space and place but also with tools to describe storyworlds [...], with a critical examination of these tools [...], with systems to anchor stories in the real world [...], and with a rich corpus of work on how people experience space and place” (*Narrating Space* 225). Ryan et al. also contend that “[a]s for geography, it needs narratives and narratology because, if it wants to capture the experience of space and place in its emotional, existential, and phenomenological dimensions, its richest source of data are the stories people create involving space and place” (225). Through a similar lens, Robert T. Tally Jr., in his foreword to his translation of Bertrand Westphal’s *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Places* (2011), argues for the significance of geocriticism, noting that it “allows us to emphasize the ways that literature interacts with the world, but also to explore how all ways of dealing with the world are somewhat literary” (x).

One aspect that the aforementioned approaches share, whether overtly or covertly, is the relationship between space and time. In his paper “Towards a Theory

of Space in Narrative” (1984), Gabriel Zoran foregrounds this relationship and views space through the lens of the chronotope, a concept that originates in Einstein’s Theory of Relativity and became one of the most influential terms in literary theory thanks to Mikhail Bakhtin and his seminal *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (1981). The chronotope, according to Bakhtin, signifies “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature”, which describes “the inseparability of space and time [...] as a formally constitutive category of literature” (84). Therefore, the chronotope is inherently encompassed by the notion of transformation—of changing shape—since it does not, according to Zoran, “signify all things that may be found in space and time, but only what may be defined by an integration of spatial and temporal categories as movement and change” (318).

As a consequence, Zoran theorises space by conceptualising three main spatial levels, one of which is the chronotopic level, which designates “the structure imposed on space by events and movements” and underlines the space’s dependence on the plot (315). According to Ryan et al, Zoran’s chronotopic level successfully links “all sites mentioned in the story [...] into a network” (21). In the analysis that follows, I draw from Zoran’s chronotopic approach and examine the relationship between space, plot and characterisation, while underlining the notion of transformation (both physical and mental) as the conduit for such a relationship.

Accessibility and Mobility: The Fertility Clinic as Heterotopia

The notion of space plays a significant role in Djavadi’s novel, not only in that it engenders the narrative’s main theme of immigration and exile on a macroscopic level, but also forms a network of plot connections related to the storyworld on a

microscopic level. In particular, the most unexpected and underestimated spaces like bedrooms and living rooms serve as much of a role as the virtually broader places such as cities, like Tehran and Paris. In fact, *Disoriental* begins with an episode regarding an escalator, in the novel's first homonymous chapter: "In Paris, my father, Darius Sadr, never took the escalator. The first time I went down into a metro station with him, on April 21, 1981, I asked him why. His answer was, 'Escalators are for them.' By 'them', he meant you, obviously. [...] Everytime I see an escalator, I think of him" (11).

An entirely underrepresented space in literature and a very specific feature of public space, the moving staircase that carries people between floors, assisting them in entering and exiting the metro station, introduces not only the narrated story but also two of its main characters, Kimiâ and particularly her father. The description of the escalator is not about the space itself, but rather a reflection of Darius Sadr's character; by refusing to use the escalator, Darius rejects the temporary comfort it offers, feeling that he hasn't yet earned such a privilege. This privilege, of course, refers to the assimilation and sense of belonging in a new place as a former exile, since for him, being accommodated into effortless movement from point A to point B feels like "a sort of abuse, if not outright theft" (11). As the narrator states, "[h]is destiny was henceforth joined to the staircases of the world, to the passage of time without surprises, and the indifferent gazes of passers-by" (11). Darius' perception of himself and his sense of worth are heavily influenced by external circumstances, particularly evident in his perception of not having earned access to specific spaces, such as the staircase.

In addition, when the narrator prefaces the story that is about to unfold, warning the reader about the narrative's anachronisms and overall non-linearity, she describes her life story by providing its topography:

Talking about the present means I have to go deep into the past, to cross borders and scale mountains and go back to that lake so enormous they call it a sea. I have to let myself be guided by the flow of images and free associations, the natural fits and starts, the hollows and bumps carved into memories by time. But the truth of memory is strange, isn't it? (12)

The topographic description of borders, mountains, sea, hollows and bumps evokes the imagery of a map, as if Kimiâ's life is a vast landscape ready to be travelled across and explored. Memory serves as the vehicle for such travelling, allowing for the movement across both time and space.

As a consequence, the retrospective narrative in *Disoriental* may be characterised as topoanalytic. According to Gaston Bachelard and his seminal work in space studies titled *The Poetics of Space: The Classic Look at How We Experience Intimate Spaces* (1994), "[t]opoanalysis" is described as "the systematic psychological study of the sites of our intimate lives" (8). "In the theater of the past that is constituted by memory," Bachelard continues,

the stage setting maintains the characters in their dominant roles. At times we think we know ourselves in time, when all we know is a sequence of fixations in the spaces of the being's stability – a being who does not want to melt away, and who, even in the past, when he sets out in search of things past, wants

time to “suspend” its flight. In its countless alveoli space contains compressed time. That is what space is for. (8)

Djavadi constructs a complex and beautiful topoanalysis through the memories of her protagonist, whose narrative retrospectively reconstructs the lives of her family members by localising and conceptualising them in their respective spaces. Thus, the relationship between the analysis of space and the analysis of character is interilluminating and interdependent, as both types of representations echo one another.

The next significant space introduced in the novel is the wing of Cochin Hospital, specifically the fertility clinic in Paris that Kimiâ visits multiple times throughout the narrative. This is where her own story truly begins - not her parents', grandparents', or even great-grandparents', but her own. The clinic holds great significance for her characterisation, as it reveals a crucial part of her identity that remains suppressed for much of the narrative: her bisexuality. It is gradually disclosed that Kimiâ is trying to get pregnant so she can raise the child with her partner, Anna. However, since medically-assisted procreation would not be approved for a same-sex couple, Kimiâ and her friend Pierre present themselves to the doctors and administrators as prospective parents. They have agreed that their friend, Pierre, will contribute as the donor so that she can conceive. The space of the fertility clinic also constitutes the only place in the novel where physical movement ceases. Kimiâ is always waiting in a waiting room or a doctor's office, rendering the clinic a seemingly static space. Time slows down, and so does physical movement. However, even though physical movement ceases, other types of movement occur; reminiscence, nostalgia, and

recalling of past events constitute movements of the mind across time and space. They set the narrative in motion, even though Kimiâ is physically motionless. Yet the fertility clinic, for these reasons, is the space that activates the most transitions; it is the point zero from which all other movements across time and space stem.

In particular, I argue that the fertility clinic in *Disoriental* constitutes a “heterotopia”, a term derived from Michel Foucault’s seminal essay “Of Other Spaces” (1986). According to Foucault, a heterotopia is a “counter-site”, a certain type of “plac[e] [that is] outside of all places, even though it may seem possible to indicate their location in reality” (24). Hetero-topia translates into Other-space, Other-locus. Potentially, the space of the fertility clinic belongs to what Foucault calls “crisis heterotopias”, namely, the “privileged or sacred or forbidden places, reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis” (“Of Other Spaces” 24).

This characterisation seems pertinent in the context of *Disoriental* in a dual manner: on one hand, a fertility clinic, in general, could be argued that it is indeed “reserved for individuals [...] in a state of crisis” since the couples who reach out to such a place require medical assistance in order to conceive and become parents. On the other hand, the concept of “forbidden place” also applies to Djavadi’s novel as Kimiâ is a queer woman and only presents to be in a heterosexual relationship with Pierre to gain access to medically assisted reproduction as she wouldn’t qualify to get treated otherwise: “My case doesn’t correspond to either of the three possibilities. It’s much more complex, more deceitful than that. It’s a matter of strategy and manipulation. A plan conceived by gangsters. You have no idea yet, reader, of the risk

I'm taking by writing this. [...] They'd spit on my face. They'd throw me out in the street" (Djavadi 20).

Approached as a crisis heterotopia, the fertility clinic thematises space as a locus of difference both within and beyond the space of the clinic per se, thereby locating the "other" in reproductive ("reserved for individuals who are [...] in a state of crisis") and sexual difference ("forbidden places") (Foucault, "Of Other Spaces" 25). In other words, the fertility clinic is a metaphorical "sacred space" reserved only for heterosexual couples "in crisis", the sacredness of which is violated by Kimia, who manages to gain access to said "forbidden" space by deceitful means (Foucault, "Of Other Spaces" 25). At the same time, the clinical space can also be conceived as a "heterotopia of deviation", namely, as a space "in which individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed" (Foucault, "Of Other Spaces" 25). Even though the term "placed" does not align with the nature of a fertility clinic, in the same way that it would align with, let's say, a retirement home or a psychiatric hospital (two examples that Foucault provides), we could say that the purpose that such a space serves is related to the management of the biological and social deviation of infertility by responding to the need that infertility creates.

Another principle that the concept of heterotopia designates is its capability "of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible" (Foucault, "Of Other Spaces" 25). The two main realms that intersect in the context of a fertility clinic are the private with the public space. The clinic serves as a public space where patients interact with medical professionals and other patients, while also being a place for private consultations and deeply personal

decisions and treatments. This intersection potentially welcomes another interpretation; the topic of conception and sexuality, which naturally pertains to the couple's personal and private life, in such a space becomes public, non-private.

The final principle of heterotopias is their relation to "slices in time – which is to say that they open onto what might be termed, for the sake of symmetry heterochronies" (Foucault, "Of Other Spaces" 26). The concept of time plays a vital role in the context of a fertility clinic, as this medical space is inherently connected to one of humans' most significant time-bound life moments; birth. In particular, patients seek the advice of medical professionals and undergo medical procedures with the hopes that those treatments will, in the future, result in a conception. The present, then, intersects with the future in a space that fosters (as well as aims at) heterochrony by definition; it is aimed at the couple to get pregnant in a few weeks to a few months, which will result in the conceived child's birth nine months later.

Lastly, according to Foucault, the final trait of heterotopic spaces is "that they have a function in relation to all the space that remains" ("Of Other Spaces" 27). This is particularly true for a fertility clinic, as the medically assisted reproduction that occurs there aims to create a new life that will exist outside the clinical space in the realm of everyday life. The couple undergoes this process with the hope that their lives will be fundamentally transformed and enriched by the treatment due to the desired outcome of having and raising a child—a change that encompasses all areas of their existence. Specifically, for the story of *Disoriental*, this last principle of heterotopias is particularly interesting, when approached from a narratological level, as the episodes in the fertility clinic are those that connect all other episodes in an anachronic manner.

Put differently, the narrative “function”, to echo Foucault’s definition, of this heterotopic space directly relates to “all the [*narrative/textual*] space that remains” by acting—for the majority of the narrative—as the connective tissue that gives structure to the narrative, and as the narrative point from which the remaining anachronies depart by means of associative thinking.

The first example of this is the evocation of an Iranian caravanserai, a space that Kimiâ antithetically associates with the silent waiting area of the clinic. She remarks that if the waiting room was located in Iran, people would meet each other, gossip, exchange views on politics, invite one another to their homes, bring food, and talk endlessly, as if they were gathered in a caravanserai.

Like Scheherazade, who used the power of words to put an end to King Shahryar’s bloody crusade against the women of the realm, the average Iranian feels trapped in a daily existential dilemma: speak or die. Telling and retelling, embellishing, and lying, in a society full of danger and corruption, where the simplest fact of going out to buy a stick of butter could end in a nightmare, means staying alive. [...] Silence, on the other hand, means closing your eyes and lying down in your tomb and closing the lid. (Djavadi 54)

As May Ngo argues in “*Disoriental* and the Dichotomies of Diaspora” (2021), the “cacophony” described in the passage above—reflecting the “speak or die” ultimatum embedded in the Iranian consciousness—is “intentional” (237). It underscores the connection between the novel’s portrayal of the diasporic experience—expressed through Kimiâ’s role as a modern-day Scheherazade, who strives to tell her family’s story through a mode of narration that is deliberately

fragmented, disjointed, and marked by moments of personal and political concealment—and its narrative structure, which is characterised by a purposeful use of narrative “montage” (Ngo 237). As Jasmin Cooper (2024) adds, the narrative “jump[s] forwards and backwards in time,” refusing any orientation toward linearity and instead establishing “a continual dialectic of partial disclosures and purposeful withholding of the full (hi)stories of the characters” (4)—a purposeful “authorial praxis of disorientation” (4) that the montage helps to realise. Additionally, Ngo argues that the ultimate function of this cinematic technique—the juxtaposition of “divergent images together, side by side”—is to create connections between first- and second-generation immigrants within the diaspora (238). This dynamic between the two realms is further illustrated in the novel through the thematisation of space—for example, in the depiction of Iranians gathering in caravanserais (as seen in the passage above), contrasted with the French conception of personal space.

Caravanserais are roadside inns that provide caravans, pilgrims and other travelers with food, water and shelter. They can rest and recover from the day's journey in order to leave by daylight the next day and keep moving towards their final destination. Caravanserais are also places where people exchange stories from their personal histories and share their experiences. They constitute a literal constant, through which movement keeps occurring during the travellers' temporary stay. When Kimiâ compares the two spaces, she mainly compares the people's relationship to each other and to the concept of crossing paths, of meeting someone by virtue of being in the same location with them. She argues that “the French don't feel the need to get close to each other and communicate and cast their nets beyond the usual patch of

sea” (54) because they have nothing bad to bond over; the French government has taken care of everything, creating a country of security and stability.

Hence, the French tend to be introverted, keeping everything to themselves, protecting their own security, welfare and “personal space as fiercely as a mother hen [...] her eggs” (54). In fact, Kimiâ finds herself identifying with the French behavior after years of living in Paris and adopting their worldview, rather than with the Iranians from her home country. She characteristically says:

I have become - as I’m sure everyone does who has left his or her country - someone else. Someone who has translated myself into other cultural codes. Firstly in order to survive, and then to go beyond survival and forge a future for myself. And since it is a generally acknowledged idea that something is lost in translation, it should come as no surprise that we unlearn -at least partially- what we used to be, to make room for what we have become. (Djavadi 54)

Therefore, the reflection on the space of the waiting room at the fertility clinic and its comparison to an Iranian caravanserai is a reflection on Kimiâ’s own sense of social identity; thinking about space equals thinking about the positioning of the self in terms of social settings across two different cultures.

The evoking of a similar connection between Western and Eastern spaces takes place when the protagonist is out and about in Paris, “sitting in a café or on a folding seat on the metro, in a century driven by technology and machines” (86) and suddenly thinks about her grandmother who grew up in an andarouni. She recalls all the stories about her grandmother’s life in the harem, in the earth of Mazandaran with its unique topography due to the Caspian sea, the “lake that descended from an ancient ocean,

the Paratethys; a lake so large that people call it a sea [,] [c]omplex and teeming with fish, and of a blue that insinuated itself into the eyes of a generation, and then was distilled into the next” (86). Kimiâ recognises that “it’s not their world that flows in [her] veins anymore [...] but their stories,” which she has endeavoured to preserve across different continents and decades. Despite the effort of carrying these stories with her—stories that have emigrated alongside her since fleeing Iran and have been constantly relocated (from the past to the present, from Mazandaran and Tehran to Paris)—she finds herself in the present moment at the fertility clinic. Here, it is technology and progress that aid her in having a child, highlighting a stark contrast between the old world of her heritage and the modern world she now inhabits.

Another memory that is evoked by a stimulus in the fertility clinic, a smell that comes off a doctor as he crosses the hallway, takes Kimiâ back to a space of her past, specifically, her biology classroom in sixth grade right after they had moved from Iran to France. She recalls not being able to translate herself into this new world, this new culture yet, whose “language [is] reserve[ed] for people who are immersed in it and deni[ed] to those who just dip their toes in every now and then” (111). Her lack of sufficient vocabulary knowledge becomes quickly apparent at school, particularly in lessons like biology whose terminology is specific and oftentimes exclusive to the local species, yet Kimiâ recognizes (from the standpoint of her current life and circumstances) that “this scar that runs across my vocabulary is my only concession to vanity; the only hint of resistance in my... efforts to integrate, let’s call them” (112). Her non-assimilated vocabulary thus becomes a space of authentic existence that still carries and embodies the past; a space that holds her full identity with all its transitional moments of spatialised embodiment:

Because to really integrate into a culture, I can tell you that you have to *disintegrate* first, at least partially, from your own. You have to separate, detach, disassociate. No one who demands that immigrants make “an effort at integration” would dare look them in the face and ask them to start by making the necessary “effort of disintegration”. They’re asking people to stand atop the mountain without climbing it first. (112; italics in original)

A few pages later, Kimiâ describes language as a “façade of normality” that “cracks and hangs in shreds from their embarrassed body” once immigrants start engaging in conversations in the new language with the locals (117). The space of language, then, also houses shame and humiliation at the expense of sheltering the aforementioned authentic existence.

Furthermore, the hospital room where Sara gave birth to Kimiâ is another space connected to language and identity. It is in that room where Sarah decides her daughter’s name, which derives from Arabic and Greek and translates into Alchemy. The birth of Kimiâ (and her name) is her first birth, as her second takes place a decade later when she and her family move to Paris, and her identity has to be born anew; instead of Kimiâ, she is called “Kimia” or “Kim” or “Kimy” by others, rendering language a locus of simultaneous *dislocation* and *relocation*. “To be honest”, Kimiâ says, “nothing is more like exile than birth” (140). She compares the womb with the person’s first home, the first domestic space that they occupy and from which they get exiled. For Kimiâ, then, the experience of immigration resembles a second exile, a second birth, and Iran, particularly Tehran, resembles the womb - the “protective

cocoon” from which she is banished “only to be propelled into an unknown world where [she] constantly ha[s] to deal with curious stares” (140).

Other spaces that are introduced by evocation of Kimiâ’s memory while being at the clinic are the birouni and andarouni in Mazandaran, a province in northern Iran. It is noteworthy that the narrator offers extensive historical and geographical context for the various place names mentioned, often through footnotes, thereby creating a parallel geographical narrative—or narrative geography—that runs alongside the main story and serves to “help anchor [...] and orient us Western readers” (Ngo 237). As far as birouni and andarouni are concerned, they constitute the two places that introduce Kimiâ’s great-grandfather’s story. Both birouni and andarouni were a part of the same estate, where the former constituted the main building where Montazemolmolk lived along with one hundred twenty-three armed men and dozens of male servants, and the latter was the harem, the place where Montazemolmolk’s fifty-two wives with his twenty-eight children and twenty female servants lived. The estate is characterised by Kimiâ’s Uncle Number Two—who tells this particular part of the family story and Kimiâ evokes in this chapter—as “marvelous”, the andarouni as “remote and impenetrable as the Promised Land itself”, and “as a mysterious and crazy place, an enigma” (22).

This story, as narrated by Uncle, is one of the recurring family tales exchanged during their dinners, amidst the backdrop of the Iranian Revolution. Reflecting on these family gatherings, Kimiâ remarks:

Sometimes I wonder if the actual purpose of these get-togethers is to get to that point. To those neglected memories at the end of a path that’s become otherwise inaccessible. To the little girls that we were back then, lost now in

the meanderings of our fragmentary and fiction-generating memories. The adults we have become need those dinners to access the children we were, to believe they ever really existed. (24)

Through the use of spatial vocabulary such as “path,” “inaccessible,” “access,” and even the metaphorical phrase “to get to that point,” Kimiâ portrays the evocation of memories as a process of spatial accessibility rather than solely temporal. For her, revisiting the past entails gaining access to the same spaces her ancestors inhabited, achieved through traversing the landscape of memory. This process involves dislocation and relocation, a movement not only across time but more significantly across space.

So far, I have attempted to illustrate the connection between characters and spaces through the lens of accessibility and mobility. I have discussed that the way characters position themselves—or fail to position themselves—in space reveals different forms of relationality with social and cultural structures, thus uncovering aspects of their identity. Darius’ perpetual hesitation to use the staircase, as a means of effortlessly transitioning between spaces, symbolises his self-exile from French culture, while Kimiâ’s presence in the fertility clinic, as a locus of heterotopia, functions as the connective tissue that unites different narrative episodes, as well as facets of her identity, both past and present, emphasising the complex intersectional aspects of her character. In contrast, places like the caravanserai, the birouni, and the andarouni highlight the cultural differences between Western and Eastern societies. In the section that follows, I focus on the functioning of indoor spaces as frames for the characters’ movements, and particularly on the space of the home and its

transformation from a domestic to a political site. Lastly, I interpret Kimiâ's body as a metaphorically heterotopic space, serving as a frame for her identity, and I parallel the politicisation of home with the politicisation of Kimiâ's body, highlighting the implications of space violation.

The Political Boundaries of Privacy: Home as a Public Space

Marie-Laure Ryan et al. describe the notion of spatial frame as "the immediate surroundings of the character", as "shifting scenes of action [that] may flow into each other" (24). "Spatial frames", Ryan et al. continue, "are hierarchically organized by relations of containment (a room is a subspace of a house), and their boundaries may be either clear-cut or fuzzy (for instance, a landscape might slowly change as characters move through it) (24). This definition suggests that the notion of transition is inherent in the conceptualisation of spatial frames. As these frames blend into each other within a convention of containment, they presuppose the character's movement through them, enabling the transition from one frame to another.

In *Disoriental*, the transition between those frames that pertain to indoor spaces, particularly the home, also signifies important transitions in the plot and the representation of space per se. As Bal contends in *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (2017), "[t]he space can also remain entirely in the background. In many cases, however, space is thematized: it becomes an object of presentation itself. Space thus becomes an acting place rather than the place of action. It influences the fabula, and the fabula becomes subordinate to the presentation of space" (127). Therefore, depending on the transition of spatial boundaries from frame to frame, the

space is thematised differently as a result of the collapse of the boundaries that both delineate and signify each frame.

An example of this, although one of the less characteristic ones, occurs when Kimiâ learns about the death of her uncle just before she leaves her house for work, at the moment she is about to exit the frame that designates the main boundary of her domestic space: the door. As she stands at the door, her phone rings and her sister informs her of the circumstances of Uncle's passing. While Kimiâ tries to take everything in, she notices a cockroach along the baseboards of the foyer, entering and exiting a crack in the wall. She transgresses from narrating the main story and starts describing the cockroach instead: "The apartment's been infested with them for several weeks now; it's the restaurant on the ground floor. Despite the hours I've spent cleaning, spraying every nook and cranny with ever-more toxic products, it seems impossible to "stop the invasion" (Djavadi 32). In the contained space of the building, the boundaries between floors are transgressed by cockroaches. When the cockroach enters Kimiâ's frame, the representation of the space as a domestic site of cleanliness and normativity transitions into a space dually contaminated by the presence of the cockroach and death. The attention is immediately drawn to the space, rather than Kimiâ's feelings towards the news of her Uncle's passing, substituting the theme of loss with the theme of invasion, of dirt. Just as the phone call—and, by extension, the news—metaphorically invades her life, the cockroach invades her space.

In addition, another example of spatial movement that influences the thematisation of space, concerns the Sadr household during Kimiâ's childhood and the assassination of General Rahmani, a militant in support of Shah and the Pahlavi

government against which the Iranian people are massively demonstrating. When Kimiâ is seven years old and her father attends protests and secret political meetings for the Revolution, the General breaks into her family's house looking for Darius. At that time, Kimiâ, her two sisters, and her mother are present. After threatening her mother, Sarah, with a gun, the General flees the house and is ultimately lynched by the protestors outside. From that moment on, the domestic space of the Sadr family's living room transitions into a danger zone, a space of invasion and terror. Put differently, the invasion of the private sphere transforms the home into a political, public arena.

The indoor, domestic space in Djavadi's novel serves additionally as the main narrative element that sets the plot in motion. In particular, after Kimiâ's family moves into their new apartment in Iran in October 1970, Sarah and Darius make the biggest political decision of their life thus far; to write a letter directly to the Shah and *"denounce the inconsistencies of the regime, repression and absence of freedom of expression, and the economic gap between the wealthy and the rest of the population"*, a letter which is *"considered the first stone of the 1979 Iranian Revolution"* (177; italics in original). The "narrow kitchen" (174) is the main space that draws the narrative attention as it is the frame that initially fosters Sara and Darius' first discussion on how they should proceed with their plan, as well as the frame in which the letter is being written and transcribed: "The next night, Darius sat down in the same spot and continued writing [...] At sunrise, when Darius went to grab a couple hours' sleep, Sara took over. She sat down in the same spot and made a clean copy of the pages Darius had crammed with his frenetic crossings-out and chicken-scratch, until it was time to wake us up and get us ready for school" (175). Right before the letter is sent, the

kitchen, former space of tension, courage, conspiracy and revolution, transforms again into “the theatre of the mundane” (176) serving as the space where the children eat their breakfast. Therefore, the movement between the frame of the kitchen and the other spaces (bedrooms and living room) signifies the different thematisation and representation of the space; the initially uneventful frame of the kitchen transforms into a locus of conspiracy and revolution, until it temporarily transitions back into its mundane former function.

After the publication of the letter, every Friday morning of that summer, the apartment becomes a space of invasion by the family’s friends and acquaintances, journalists and SAVAK spies, who look for discussions, meetings and information. The front door is perpetually being left open to accommodate the visitors, rendering the former private space of domestic life a public site. Kimiâ feels “robbed of [her] parents” (181) and, ultimately, her space. The fact that Darius needs “to go into the laundry room, where he [can] be interviewed in private” (181) underlines the sense of privacy loss and the transitioning of the family apartment into a shared and fully accessible space of political encounters and controversy.

One of the novel’s more significant narrative moments that foregrounds the relationship between plot, space and thematisation is Darius’ assassination in their home, or else “The Event”. The narrator says that for most of her adolescent years, before entering the family’s apartment, she always anticipated opening the door to her parents’ dead, assassinated bodies: “It was only when I thought I was ready, when I thought my heart wouldn’t fail me, that I would turn the key and open the door. [...] Once I was in the entryway, as the peace and order of the living room slowly registered

on my retina, a new wave of anxiety would wash over me. *What if they were in the bedroom? What if they'd been killed in there instead?*" (296; italics in original). The space of the family home—what the ancient Greeks metonymically called *hestia* (hearth) to emphasise the warmth and connection that fosters the family unit—thereby transitions into a space of fear, uncertainty, and danger. When the Iranian government starts to look for Darius anew, six years after the family departs from Iran, he and Sara sit the girls down in the kitchen to explain the increasing potential danger. Again, the domestic space is transformed into a potential war zone, localising the sense that the family's "destiny was the tragedy of loss" in the heart of the home (298). Ultimately, Darius is murdered inside their apartment, in the middle of the living room, stigmatising the space as a site of death.

Coming back to Bal's narrative concept of the frame (namely, the space in which a character is situated), he notes that "the boundary that delimits the frame can be heavily invested with meaning. Narratives can endorse that meaning, reject or change it, or play on different ways in which characters are situated in relation to it. And narrative quite frequently feeds off the horror of the invasion of space that leads to destruction. [...] The more allegorical this fable, the more political becomes its moral" (126). In particular, the boundaries for the frame of the home in *Disoriental* are the boundaries that delimit the frame between the public and the private sphere; when those boundaries collapse, then the domestic space becomes a political arena, and what was formerly seen as a space of protection, comfort and family quality time, it is from now on seen only as a public, fully accessible space for political endeavors. The lines between home and non-home, private and political life, are blurred to the point that the domestic space is read only as political. Potentially, the same can be

metaphorically argued for the (exiled, immigrant) body of Kimiâ as a frame for her identity.

What I argue here is that the immigrant body is perpetually viewed as political due to its acquired difference post-exile. Similar to the Sadr family home, which is always at risk of invasion due to the collapse of boundaries between public and private space, the body of the disoriented individual becomes a political space by virtue of its otherness. In other words, after Kimiâ and her family move to France from Iran, she is constantly reminded of her non-assimilated vocabulary, imperfect French, and her clumsiness in adapting to the new culture. As Jasmine Cooper argues in “Queer, Migrant Non-Parenthood in *Désorientale* by Négar Djavadi and *Gabrielle* by Agnès Vannouvong” (2024), “[l]anguage is the locus of [Kimiâ’s] exposure as Other, and it not only incites shame but also leaves her feeling dispossessed, disoriented” (8). It is as if she ceases to be just a person upon immigrating. Instead, her “frame” is persistently seen through a disoriental lens, her otherness blurring the lines between private and public, rendering her body a locus of violent politicisation. Such politicisation, as if her body belongs to the public sphere, allows others to subject her to public evaluation and judgment.

In other words, her “frame” is read as what Said calls “an imaginative geography” which is based on the universal practice of designating in one’s mind a familiar space which is “ours” and an unfamiliar space beyond “ours”, which is “theirs” [as] a way of making geographical distinctions that *can be* entirely arbitrary” (“ORIENTALISM*” 167; italics in original). In Kimiâ’s case, the arbitrariness of this notion is rooted in her embodied immigrant identity, which is perceived and

interpreted as otherness long before she, as a young girl in Paris, becomes aware of the divide between “we” and “they,” “our land” and, as Said describes it, “barbarian land” (“ORIENTALISM*” 167). Thus, this geographical distinction is inherently imaginative, imbued with fictional connotations that define the exiled, immigrant subjectivity imposed upon her against her will. Consequently, the Orient in the novel carries a dual significance: it represents both the East—specifically Iran, Kimiâ’s homeland—and the land of the unfamiliar Other, whose arbitrary and fictionalised traits seep into Kimiâ’s perceived identity.

Furthermore, drawing from Foucault’s concept of heterotopia again, I want to argue that Kimiâ’s body may also be read as a metaphorically heterotopic space. Both from a standpoint of sexuality and immigrant identity, Kimiâ can be seen as the embodiment of a localised heterotopia in many ways. To begin with, she embodies two different spaces that are otherwise incompatible: the Orient and the West, Iran (Tehran) and France (Paris). She constitutes and reconciles the intersection of two places that are geographically and culturally antithetical. At the same time, she also embodies two antithetical ontological spaces—orientation and disorientation, dislocation and relocation, and disintegration and integration. Her body comprises a world of representation which, looking at it from a geocritical standpoint, is formed by numerous transgressions and crossings, assuming a locus of multifocality. As Bertrand Westphal contends in *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Places* (2011), “[s]pace revolves around the body, just as the body is located in space. The body gives the environment a spatiotemporal consistency; above all, it confers a measure to the world and tries to give it a rhythm of its own, which can then be scanned in the work of representation” (64).

Approached in this manner, Kimiâ's body is an inherently heterochronic space due to its temporariness and its connection to what Foucault calls "time in its most fleeting, transitory, precarious aspect" ("Of Other Spaces" 26). Therefore, the human body in its morality can be intrinsically "linked to a slice in time" (Foucault, "Of Other Spaces" 26)—the individual's life span, the period of time between life and death. Kimiâ's body also has "a function in relation to all the space that remains" (Foucault, "Of Other Spaces" 27), as she interacts with other people and navigates different spaces on a daily basis, rendering the human body an inherent space of relational functionality with the world around it. Lastly, the concept of heterotopia finds a sense of deviation, of otherness.

With regard to Kimiâ, she embodies several intersectional aspects of non-normativity in terms of assimilation that render her body a heterotopic space. Her experiences and expressions of gender and sexuality deviate from the normative expectations of both her Iranian heritage and her adopted French culture, further entrenching her status as the Other. In addition, her family's political exile from Iran adds another layer of Otherness to her embodied identity, as it becomes politicised by the circumstances of her displacement and the political history she carries, which contributes to her marginalisation. As a consequence, interpreting Kimiâ's body as a frame for her identity—much like the home as a frame for the Sard family or the clinic for Kimiâ—not only illustrates the connection between space and character but also highlights the relationship between heterotopia and marginalised subjectivity, emphasising how lived experiences are localised in the body of the individual.

Spatialising Sexuality

One of the most interesting spaces in *Disoriental* is the “secret” room of Uncle Number Two in his apartment in Tehran. Kimiâ, at around the age of seven, takes an interest in the secrecy that surrounds that room, which is always kept closed, and decides to explore it as her family is having dinner. The top-floor room reveals that Uncle Number Two does not sleep with his wife, but rather by himself. Among the things in the room, Kimiâ finds, is a “meticulously-arranged top of a small chest of drawers” and a series of black and white photographs “in various formats, yellowed by time” (151). His mother is the primary protagonist of the series, followed by his brothers and himself of various ages. There are also “photos of young Persians here and there, dressed Western-style, posing in front of gleaming automobiles or against the backdrop of the Alborz mountains” (151), but no pictures of Uncle’s wife and children, nieces or nephews, or his father’s.

There is one particular photo that captures Kimiâ’s attention and which, years later, explains to her the existence of Uncle’s isolated bedroom, away from his wife. The picture portrays himself and another man in a garden, about twenty years old, whose arms seem to be around Uncle’s shoulders: “The shadows thrown across their middles, like a veil placed there deliberately to hide a detail, blur the line where one body stops and the other begins” (151). The secrecy of the room mirrors Uncle’s secret yet seemingly perfect life as a closeted gay man. Just like Kimiâ herself, he is also ashamed that he will never be able to live up to his mother’s expectations, and so he constructs a superficially normal, family life. His personal space is another form of exile; situated on the top floor, kept close to everyone else, and detached from the

house's main locus of the family (namely, the couple's bedroom), Uncle Number Two's room encapsulates a narrative of self-exile and, as Kimiâ has already noted before, "a façade of normativity" (117).

A space that is thematised similarly is Kimiâ's room in her the family's temporary apartment in Mandazaran, right before they flee to Paris. It is the space in which Kimiâ starts contemplating her sexuality, especially after her sister warns her to stop acting like a lesbian:

I spent the next few hours by myself upstairs, in the unfurnished room where we slept. Suddenly, what I felt could no longer be expressed using simple words. [...] I stayed for a long time staring out the window at the peeling bark on the branches of the chestnut tree until it became clear and recognizable. Outside, nothing had changed. [...] Only this morning that whole quiet world had still belonged to me, included me, but now it was going its own way, leaving me behind, alone. (Djavadi 207)

Kimiâ decides to throw away her favorite baggy t-shirt to illustrate the new phase of her identity, which includes embracing her femininity and girlhood, rendering her and her sisters' empty room as a locus of isolation, shame, loss and transition. Later on, as the narrator Kimiâ contemplates her past alternative life and considers the possibility of having lived as a closeted bisexual, she evokes the domestic image of a traditional heterosexual housewife. Instead of presenting the space of the house and her provisional role in it as a locus of protection, calmness, and family abundance, she sees it as "death", as a form of internal "exile", as the localisation of "pretense" and secrecy: "I could waste my life in the pursuit of pretense. Just like Uncle Number Two.

Repressed, ashamed, frustrated, miserable. I could become a wife and mother for the sake of peace, blend in with the masses, avoid devastating whispers and rumours” (214). The space of the bedroom becomes yet again a site of secrecy and desire for assimilation. Just like Uncle’s, little Kimiâ’s bedroom is a locus of self-exile, a place to hide herself from the outside world, but mainly from the remaining house. By withdrawing from the rest of the domestic space, they also distance themselves from their family and, once more, from the *hestia*, the family “hearth”, the very essence of what transforms a house into a home.

The notion of space, especially the concept of home, intricately intertwines with Kimiâ’s exploration of her gender and sexuality. During her formative years, her sense of self is predominantly shaped within this space through interactions with her parents, particularly her father. After Darius resigns from the newspaper he is working for, because a SAVAK member (an agent assigned by the National Intelligence and Security Agency, which by means of espionage and informing infiltrated every system in Iran) is appointed as editor-in-chief, he remains at home with his daughter for a year. During that time, Kimiâ’s relationship with her father flourishes, resulting in her feeling “the new and intoxicating sensation of being [her] father’s child rather than [her]mother’s daughter” (168). While Sarah is working as a teacher, Darius remains at home taking care of Kimiâ; “A man who stayed at home and a woman who worked outside the house: that was how, hand in hand, they entered the arena of political conduct. They were already the most modern couple in our family; now they became the most underground too” (169).

Darius teaches Kimiâ conventionally male things, from shoe-shining and filling the pipe with tobacco to reading the newspaper and discussing global politics (171). Having stopped “paying attention to her gender”, Darius treats Kimiâ “the same way as he would have his imaginary son” (161). During that time, she also has her hair cut into a pixie cut and dresses exclusively as a tomboy. Studying her father closely, she starts picking up his behaviors and everyday rituals (like shaving), hoping that one day she can implement them in her routine too: “And that, in a nutshell, is the kind of silently schizophrenic state in which I spent my childhood. Basically, before other developments occurred, O knew I was a girl – but I was sure that, when I grow up, I would become not a woman, but a man” (51).

Positioning herself within her father's presence, Kimiâ's identity is shaped by sharing the same space with him, by existing within his “frame”. Indeed, both of her parents challenged gender norms while growing up; Sara received a competent education for a girl in Armenia and later in Iran, immersing herself in politics, philosophy, and social justice. On the other hand, Darius assumed the traditionally male role from a young age, along with its associated privileges, yet embraced modernity, completely defying socially constructed gender expectations for himself, his wife and children. Together, Sara and Darius form a “gender-neutral” couple, as they both fight alongside each other in support of the Revolution without conforming to socially constructed gender norms that dictate one's role within a specific space.

In the Introduction to the Special Issue “Theorizing Space and Gender in the 21st Century” (2015), Theda Wrede proposes, building upon Judith Butler's argument on gender performance, that gender is mould in connection with the physical

environments where it is “performed”, thereby underscoring the intersection between gender and space, placing space at the core of gender performativity (10). “[B]oth gender and space, as social constructs”, Wrede contends, “not only share common traits but are also used to reinforce each other” (12). In the context of *Disoriental*, gender constitutes a space of dis/relocation, as Kimiâ finds herself grappling with her identity throughout the years, across different environments and circumstances.

Her gender—and by extension, her sexuality—constitute the embodied frame that interacts with various social and cultural environments over the years, significantly shaping her perception of the world. Describing her gender as dis/relocation suggests that her gender is, above all, a location. It is the space she searches for when disconnected or displaced, and the space she returns to, her relocation. It is the same space she departs from at various moments in her life, attempting to escape in disbelief of her identity. Yet, despite these departures, it remains the place toward which she is perpetually oriented—“the personal experience of [an] alternativ[e] for ‘home’, sexual identity, and ways of living in the world” (Bushnell 506)—both a homeland and a site of self-exile.

Dis-/Re-Location: Towards a Disoriental Space

The conceptualisation and thematisation of space are manifested differently after the family’s immigration to France, embodying the concept of “disoriental”. The term blends the terms “disoriented” and “oriental” and designates not only a lack of direction, but also a very specific sort of puzzlement relating to the Orient, the East. It is a word with rich geographical and cultural connotations, while also offering a semantic layer of interpretation as well. The word “orient” is connected to the East

when capitalised, yet it can additionally present meaning if read as “destination”, as a sense of direction. It does not just illustrate the final point of crossing, but it also alludes to the *process* of situating oneself, to the *transformation* itself. As Cameron Fae Bushnell argues in “Orientalism Otherwise: A Poetics of Adjacency in Négar Djavadi’s *Disoriental*” (2023), “[i]n this case, the orient might be seen as a traversed space, a “journey” from one state to the next. Together, in all its parts, disoriental names a location: the orient in exile” (504). In the context of Djavadi’s novel, “disoriental” takes various forms and exhibits different manifestations as byproducts of the geographical displacement of immigrant individuals, like language, sexuality and gender expression. Localising disorientation in these aspects of identity, the novel beautifully elucidates the implications of exile in more than one dimension, problematising what it means to search for direction, for purpose—both literally and metaphorically.

The biggest transition in terms of Kimiâ’s “disorientalism” starts when she, along with her mother and sisters, flies to Paris from Tehran in order to meet with Darius (who—for safety and political reasons—had to leave Iran first) and start a new life in the West. The space of the plane becomes a threshold, a prelude to Kimiâ’s second birth, as she is soon going to be translated into another culture and language, becoming “disoriental” (Djavadi 248). This existential space of not yet belonging anywhere, of not having a concrete direction for navigating life, is additionally manifested as a mental space of detachment. As Kimiâ mentions, it is during the flight, between Istanbul and Paris, that she starts experiencing emotional shutting down and loss of access to herself for the first time. This abruptly acquired “unpredictable mechanism” (254) is passing but repetitive, unveiling the mental disorientation that localises the disorientation of spatial reality in the mind.

Furthermore, Kimiâ's immigration is expressed and realised through the displacement of language, which thematises both geographical and cultural exile: "Soon my first name won't be pronounced in the same way anymore; the final *â* will become *a* in Western mouths, falling silent forever" (248). At the same time, the spatial displacement of the protagonist from the Orient to the West, entails an internal, psychological displacement as well. After Kimiâ starts living in Paris, she gradually immerses herself in "[d]ark, twisted [paths] with music and alcohol and illegal substances, trying to pursue assimilation by virtue of losing aspects of her former identity (253). To fit in, to integrate, as she has mentioned previously, is also to *disintegrate*, to *dislocate*, which in this case translates into the loss of the former non-accessible self, of the self that cannot fit into the new cultural environment.

In his essay "The Presencing of Place in Literature: Toward an Embodied Mode of Reading" (2011), Sten Pultz Moslund develops the concept of "*landguage*" [...] a fusion of "language" with "land" or "landscape", [which] points to the way a work's language may be laden with the natural and cultural symptomatology of its setting" (30-3; italics in original). "Whenever we move away from landscapes to langscapes", Moslund continues, "we also move from the detached contemplation of place as scenery and enter into the complex cultural and sensuous experiences of place as a lived-in world" (31). Drawing from Martin Heidegger's philosophy of language, Moslund also localises language in the concept of presence, namely, "the idea of language as something other than a medium of representation or a discursive conveyor or imposer of meaning", particularly as "a physical bringing forth" of the world to one's own senses, that engenders a "sensorial experience" (32). The conception of language as a space loaded with meaning drawn from the speaking

individual's physical environment, elucidates further the concept of being "disoriental" by foregrounding language's inherent connection to an individual's lived experience.

With regard to Kimiâ, as I have mentioned earlier in this chapter, her non-assimilated way of speaking French is connected to the fact that she (and, by extension, her language) still carries and embodies the past. To relocate to a new linguistic environment successfully, would mean first dislocating from the emotive space of Iran; a process which leads back to Kimiâ's own words about (dis)integration: "Because to really integrate into a culture, I can tell you that you have to *disintegrate* first, at least partially, from your own" (Djavadi 112; italics in original). Therefore, the type of language that *Disoriental* forms is a topography of flux—it creates a geography of various locations (both Eastern and Western) across historical periods (from the early 19th to the late 20th century) and diverse types of communication and semantics. A linguistic topography that is shaped by not only what is spoken but what remains unspoken, not only by original words but also translated, not only by homogenous vocabularies but also by heterogeneous, and not only by one type of discourse but also by various ones (medical, political, philosophical and legal discourse).

Coming back to the notion of memory, as an inherent state of temporal crossings between places, Kimiâ's mother, Sara, is one of the characters in the face of which dislocation as memory is thematised. Even though for the first two years in Paris Sara doesn't "go beyond the boundaries of [the] neighbourhood", leaving the apartment only to run errands nearby for the children, her memory is in constant

motion (259-60). The orientation of her thoughts is always pointed towards Iran, the place left behind:

[S]he retreated into the past, which had become a parallel universe as well as a field of research, where she could revisit every place, every event, every night spent waiting, praying, hoping. [...] Sometimes she would stop in the middle of the street, lost, her brain teeming with disturbing questions. Was she really in Paris? Why didn't she go home? Where was her home? (260)

Similarly to her mother, Kimiâ finds it hard to call their new space home. The newly imposed "normal" of her everyday life seems suffocating, equating their apartment to a space of confinement. In this domestic realm, the only element that transgresses time and space is the television. One day, Kimiâ comes across a concert of a rock band broadcasted on TV, which draws her attention, wishing that she was "there" with the band; "[t]here, where Iran, and France didn't exist" (265). The spatial deictic "there," which is emphatically repeated twice, signifies an *atopic* space, a space that does not really exist, a non-space. When she says that she wants to be "there", she doesn't refer to the stage or the area where the concert takes place, but to the state of being that is exuded; a state of assimilated non-belonging, where everyone who enjoys the moment is an outcast and is oriented towards the here and now, without worrying about the past or the future. This sense of dissociation, rage, rebellion and self-destruction that the music grunge scene of Paris offers is what makes Kimiâ finally feel as if she belongs. During her adolescence, Kimiâ shaves her head, starts experimenting with grunge style and working out, perceiving her body "as [her]

own country, [her] own homeland, [drawing] its contours the way [she] want[s] them” (267).

One of the final new spaces introduced in the novel is a bar called *Métamorphose*. After turning eighteen, Kimiâ travels to Brussels and meets Anna, her then-future partner. It is in this bar that Kimiâ first feels Anna will “drastically change [her] life” (279), and as Kimiâ walks further into the (very conveniently named) *Métamorphose*, she also resolutely steps further into her own metaphorical transformation and re-orientation, towards a life with Anna. Lastly, the novel ends as it started, with a reference to a space. Kimiâ has just found out that the medically-assisted treatment is successful and that she carries twins. Before meeting Anna and Pierre, she goes to the residential home where Sara has been put, who now seems to suffer from Alzheimer’s.

While Kimiâ and Sara briefly talk, Sara soon says the following, unveiling that she has always been aware of her daughter’s sexuality: “I want you to promise me that when you grow up, you’ll go to France. [...] This place isn’t for people like you. You’re too little for me to explain it to you; you wouldn’t understand. [...] I don’t want anything to happen to you; do you understand?” (334) Realising that, Kimiâ acknowledges if this discussion had taken place during her adolescence in Paris, when she needed it the most, the orientation of her life would drastically change; that she would never have fled Paris as a second-time exile to travel, that she would never have met Anna and Pierre along the way, and, potentially, that she wouldn’t have embarked on the fertility journey “into the labyrinthine corridors of Cochin Hospital” (335). “[I]f she hadn’t left

me to play hide-and-seek with my real self”, Kimiâ contends, “and with them, for so many years – there’s no question that my life would have been very different” (335).

Sara also makes her daughter promise that she will have children, no matter the kind of life she chooses to live, and Kimiâ (of course) promises. The novel ends with the following dialogue:

“Of course you’ll have children! Who knows? Maybe you’ll even have a little boy with blue eyes,” she adds, with an impish smile. “That would make your father so happy!”. [...] Just then my mobile phone rings, and her expression changes suddenly.”

“I hope nothing’s happened to Darius.”

“No, don’t worry. He’ll be home soon.” (335)

As Ngo beautifully captures, the novel opens with a prologue centred on Kimiâ’s father and ends with an epilogue focused on her mother, scenes that “bookend the novel, just as they bookend Kimiâ around the heart of who she is” (240). The ending of *Disoriental* captures the topography of the novel in a few lines; from the blue eyes that allude to the Caspian Sea, to the mention of “home” as a signifier of an empty signified (since there is no fixed meaning behind that word anymore), the ending proposes the state of being disoriental as the orient itself—not a fixed place, but a “portable orient”, a “part of the identity that [one] carr[ies] with [them] as disoriental” (Bushnell 518).

By rendering “home” the supposed destination of Darius, even though he is long dead and Sara stays in a residential care facility, Kimiâ signifies the word anew, thematising the concept of homecoming as a space of mental topography, a

metaphorically constant location that exists as a composition of storytelling and lived experience, towards which the individual is always oriented. At the same time, if “birth may be inherently linked to displacement, disorientation, and dispersal” in the novel, then “the journey to motherhood” is depicted as another form of *re*-orientation, as it “reorients the subject not simply within the family, but in the fabric of the nation” (Cooper 5). Just like Kimiâ’s relationship with her gender and sexuality, the constant “hide and seek” of her adolescent and most of her adult years, is also reflected in her relationship with home, rendering her disoriental.

Conclusions

In this chapter, I have approached narrative form from a contextual narratological perspective—one grounded in structuralism, yet attuned to gender-conscious significations. This type of formalism does not prioritise the isolated study of narrative structure by means of narrative space alone, but rather foregrounds an interdisciplinary approach—drawing on insights from sociolinguistics and geography. To highlight the interilluminating relationship between narrative form and narrated content, I have examined how narrative space is both theorised and thematised in the novel as a site—both geographical and linguistic—of multiple transitions, tensions, and intersections, revealed through the characters’ positionality, or their lack thereof, within particular spaces. Put differently, I have specifically argued that exile subjectivity in Djavadi’s novel is “taking shape” (Fawaz 54) by quite literally—and politically—*taking up space*. Through analysing and interpreting spatial accessibility, mobility and invasion, I have shown that there are different types of exile

(geographical, linguistic, with regard to sexuality/gender), the signification of which is dependent on the different ways that space is thematised across the novel.

By examining the relationship between narrative form and narrated content through the lens of transformation, one can clearly perceive the dialogic interplay between its two complementary dimensions: structural and thematic. On a thematic level, transformations within the story—such as the fertility clinic becoming a heterotopic space, the migrant body shaped into a metaphorical heterotopia, the private sphere of the home violently shifting into a public-political arena, sexuality reimagined from a site of exile to a homeland, and the continual movement between disorientation and reorientation—interact dynamically with structural transformations on the level of discourse.

These include the transitions of spatial boundaries from frame to frame (Ryan et al. 24), the metamorphosis of “landscapes” into “*langscapes*” (Moslund 31), shifts between temporal linearity and anachrony, evolving imagery, and narrative spaces that are continuously resignified by one another. Overall, *Disoriental* by Négar Djavadi employs narrative space not merely as a backdrop, but as an active agent in the narrative—thematically reconfigured to highlight the complex intersections of exilic identity. Gender emerges as a central element in the novel’s narrative framework, intricately tied to its spatial functions, as the protagonist’s identity is shaped by the diverse environments she inhabits, ultimately encapsulating a journey toward the embodiment of the orient.

Segment Three: Transition in Transgender Identity

Chapter Five

In-Between Genres/Genders: Characterising the Body of *Stone Butch Blues: A Novel* (1993) by Leslie Feinberg

Introduction

In this chapter, I aim to explore a central question: how can narrative form reconcile the importance of authentic representation in self-writing with the need for self-protection and non-exposure in trans life-writing? More specifically, how does narrative form enable this co-constitution, and how does the transgender or gender-nonconforming body, as Fawaz asks, “tak[e] shape” within its own narrative “rather than becoming fluid” (54)? I engage these questions through a close reading of *Stone Butch Blues: A Novel* by Leslie Feinberg, one of the most influential works in queer and trans literature, through the lens of corporeal narratology. In doing so, I approach gender as a formal category of narrative processing, examining its interplay with one of narrative theory’s central concepts—characterisation—to show how the somatic body *in* the novel (that of the protagonist) gives rise to and bears significantly upon the characterisation of the discursive body *of* the novel (the text itself).

The critical bibliography surrounding *Stone Butch Blues: A Novel* is notably rich, reflecting the novel’s multifaceted significance across queer, trans, narrative and labour studies. Among the more recent contributions is Angelica De Vido’s *Girlhood in the Contemporary American Novel: Coming-of-Age 1990–2020* (2025). Focusing on the intersection of literary analysis and feminist historiography, De Vido explores how Feinberg’s novel historicises the concept of girlhood within the sociopolitical

landscape of the 1990s, highlighting the implications of its queer coming-of-age narrative for the representation of queer femme community. In addition, Aren Aizura in his 2023 essay, “Flailing at Feminized Labor: SOFFAs, 1990s Trans Care Networks, *Stone Butch Blues*, and the Devaluation of Social Reproduction” offers a comparative reading of Feinberg’s novel alongside selected narratives from the 1999 small-circulation newsletter *Your SOFFA Voice*. In historicising and examining the solidarity between working-class femmes—both transgender and cisgender—in the novel, Aizura explores the intersections of care, labour, and relationality within trans communities and their support networks, while also reflecting on what trans community care looks like in the present.

Jordy Rosenberg in *Transgender Marxism’s* afterword (2021) pursues a reading of *Stone Butch Blues’* 10th anniversary edition paratext through the lens of Marxist philosophy and trans studies, illustrating how “there is a path to Marx that proceeds through transness” (288). Rosenberg specifically reads the novel’s Afterword in relation to its opening letter to the protagonist’s partner, Theresa, not as autofiction or autobiography, but as a poetics of “resistance to the demand of trans authenticity”, which offers a “unique purchase on the ambivalent relationship between literary reflexivity and trans utopias/dystopias” (“Afterword” 274).

While these approaches represent only a small portion of the expansive critical bibliography on *Stone Butch Blues*, they reveal a recurring focus on the intersections of trans embodiment, affect, socialism, and narrativity. What I aim to contribute to these ongoing conversations—and to the broader body of work on *Stone Butch Blues*—is a new reading of the novel from the standpoint of contextual—specifically,

corporeal—narratology. This new approach considers the trans body not merely through its narrative representation or intelligibility, but more crucially, as an integral component of the novel's narrative infrastructure, revealing the co-constitutive relationship between the somatic body *in* the novel and the discursive body *of* the novel itself.

To pursue the above, I draw from Daniel Punday's 2003 *Narrative Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Narratology*, the first book-length study that expanded on corporeal narratology and the view of the body as a formal category that shapes key concepts of narrative theory, like plot and characterisation. By doing so, I showcase how the corporeality of the protagonist in *Stone Butch Blues* engenders the novel's characterisation. For the purpose of my argumentation, I look at the notion of characterisation through its dual meaning; a) as the construction of a fictional character and b) as the act of *charactirisein* (*χαρακτηρίζειν*), namely, of describing the distinctive nature or features of someone or something. As far as the second definition is concerned, I will be looking specifically at the way that the novel's generic framework is informed by the representation of the protagonist's body in the narrative, with the purpose of foregrounding the connection between gender and genre in Feinberg's text.

Moreover, I analyse the gender-nonconforming body's portrayal as a "nonbody" (Punday, *Narrative Bodies* 58), and instead, its characterisation through the materiality of stone. I examine how the characterisation of the body "becomes a means of negotiating the legibility of the textual artifact" (Punday, *Narrative Bodies* 155), specifically by raising questions around the discursive body—that is, the textual

body and its generic construction. Drawing on Aren Aizura's *Mobile Subjects: Transnational Imaginaries of Gender Reassignment* (2018), I argue that the protagonist's "trans mobility" enacts a purposeful movement toward a liminal embodiment conceptualised as an "'elsewhere' space" (15)—a necessary yet marginalised zone situated between the "no longer" and the "not yet". Within this framework, I turn to Grace Lavery's theorisation of "egg theory" (2020) to consider the protagonist's liminality. Lavery positions Feinberg's narrative as a form of "futurological egg theory" (387), imagining the gender-non-conforming body from a "pre-hatched moment" (385). In this reading, the trans body emerges as a narrative component, shaping the textual body into what Lavery terms a "post-detransition text" ("Egg Theory's Early Style" 387).

To address the pressures the somatic body puts on the discursive body—specifically, how it demands narrative authenticity—I return to Punday's application of reader response theory. Here, the non-conforming trans embodiment disrupts the reader's "pre-intentions" (Iser, "The Reading Process" 282) through what Lavery (2023) identifies as "trans realism" (*Pleasure and Efficacy* 5). Just as Feinberg's narrative resists adherence to what Prosser (1998) defines as the "transsexual plot" (178), it likewise refuses a stable (and predictable) generic identity—neither fully autobiographical nor wholly fictional. Instead, it enacts what Prosser describes as "a trans genre: a text as between genres as its subject is between genders" (*Second Skins* 191).

The (Trans) Self in Life-Writing

The narrative of Feinberg's novel follows the life of Jess Goldberg, who grows up in a working-class area of Buffalo (New York) in the 1940s, flees from home and seeks refuge and community in Buffalo's lesbian scene. Jess, who identifies as a "stone butch" and whose gender dysphoria gradually increases as the narrative progresses, starts medically transitioning by taking testosterone and undergoing top surgery. After years of successfully passing as a man, Jess decides to stop hormone therapy, resulting in the cultivation of gender ambivalence in her social perception; she is read as neither a man, nor a woman, and ultimately feels at home in her trans, gender-non-conforming identity. *Stone Butch Blues: A Novel* signifies anew the genre of trans storytelling and demonstrates a radical perspective on passing as a sociopolitical survival mechanism, on transgender difference, and on the autotelic nature of gender-non-conforming identity and expression.

A merger of fiction and autobiography, Feinberg's novel broadens the scope of what novels with queer and trans protagonists and characters can do, without rendering the text an explicit offering of the self through the medium of life-writing. According to the author herself, *Stone Butch Blues* is a "very thinly disguised autobiography"⁴³ outlined in Feinberg's upbringing in a Jewish working-class family, and hir later life identifying as a butch lesbian and starting testosterone treatment after hir former coming out. Like the novel's protagonist, Feinberg ceased hir medical transition after a few years and continued to identify as transgender. In hir words about the authorial choice of crafting a fictionalised autobiography,

⁴³ Interview with Erika Horwitz, "Politics & Gender", FTM Newsletter 26.

using fiction gives you the ability to tell a very painful story that's filled with all the shame of growing up different in this society. I felt, by telling it autobiographically, that I would pull back in a lot of places. [...] I feel we've each found our own boundaries of dignity which we will not go beyond; that we deserve. I really felt that by fictionalizing the story, that I would be able to tell more of the truth; be more brutally honest than I would if I were telling my own story.⁴⁴

As a merger of fiction and autobiography, *Stone Butch Blues* can be partially included in the life-writing genre, a broad category of non-fiction which still employs fictionality to foreground the relationship between one's life, the construction of the self and the construction of the narrative that recounts (and at the same time engenders) the former two. A central idea to many literary theorists, critics and philosophers, life-writing and, particularly, self-writing is the term used to describe the generating process of connecting to oneself through self-reflection and documentation of one's own thoughts, emotions and experiences. It can also connect one's personal background and empirical history to the broader sociopolitical world in which the writing individual exists.

To write *about* the self is also often to write *the* self. As Michel Foucault (1997) wrote on self-narration:

The role of writing is to constitute [...] a "body" [a]nd this body should be understood not as a body of doctrine but, rather -following an often-evoked metaphor of digestion- as the very body of the one who, by transcribing his

⁴⁴ Interview with Erika Horwitz, "Politics & Gender", FTM Newsletter 26.

readings, has appropriated them and made their truth his own: writing transforms the thing seen or heard into “tissue and blood”. (“Self Writing” 213)

Self-writing, for Foucault, is a self-cultivating “technology” that traces the genealogy of autonomous subjects across history in their attempts to connect to their selves. Another significant voice in post-structuralist philosophy and theory, Hélène Cixous, analyses in her famous essay “The Laugh of the Medusa” (1976) the notion of self-writing from the standpoint of feminist criticism, arguing that “[b]y writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has turned into the uncanny stranger on display [...]. Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time. Write your self. Your body must be heard” (880). The interface between Foucault’s and Cixous’ approaches is the corporeal dimension of the self-writing act; to generate oneself through writing is to transmute the psychic self into a corpus of words, a textual body. Additionally, both descriptions of self-writing allude to the notion of authenticity. Foucault, by talking about the “truth” of writing (“Self Writing” 213) and Cixous, by purposefully using the word “censor” that signifies the suppression of speech, connect the composition of oneself to the practice of embodied and expressive authenticity.

The concept of the self constitutes the foundation for life-writing, the expansive genre that encompasses all subcategories related to self-referential storytelling. The genres of autobiography, memoir and personal essay have historically been the three dominant types of life-writing that trans authors employ to navigate notions of identity, gender and transition regarding those notions’ social, somatic and psychic manifestations. In his emblematic book *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of*

Transsexuality (1998), Jay Prosser analyses the narrative structures of trans autobiography and reads transsexuality as an “always narrative work, a transformation of the body that requires the remolding of the life into a particular narrative shape” (4). In fact, Prosser connects the textual with the bodily, and conceives of transition in a dual, interilluminating manner—“in its narratological sense [,] [...] as the definitive property of narrative, the progression and development that drives narrative and coheres its form”, and as “transsexuality [...], suggest[ing] that the resexing of the transsexual body is made possible through narrativization” (*Second Skins* 5).

By contending that the self-narrating act is “not only the bridge to embodiment but a way of making sense of transition, the link between locations: the transition itself” (*Second Skins* 9), Prosser positions narrative in the centre of gender-signification as it functions as both the outcome of and the process of transition all at once. Autobiographical writing is simultaneously the generator of the engendered identity as well as the identity’s manifestation. It is precisely the genre that enables and safeguards the engendered subjectivity of the writing subject; the genre is the mirror of gender, in that it reflects the image of the trans individual in both its gendered difference and its gendered unison. More importantly, autobiography offers a connection and coherence between the individual’s two selves—the past self who was living the narrated events (“the ‘I’ of the bios”) in the process of their transition, and the current self who recounts and -retrospectively- writes the narrated events (“the ‘I’ of the graph”) from a standpoint of control and “gendered relief” (Prosser, *Second Skins* 102).

For these reasons, life-writing has served as the dominant mode of trans discourse. Since the first trans autobiography called *Man into Woman: The First Sex Change, A Portrait of Lili Elbe* in 1933 which narrates the life of the Danish artist Lily Elbe as one of the first recipients of gender affirmation surgery, there has been a plethora of trans autobiographical narratives of great importance in terms of representation and visibility. From *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us* (1994) by Kate Bornstein, *She's Not There: A Life in Two Genders* (2003) by Jennifer Finney Boylan, *Becoming a Visible Man* (2004) by Jamison Green to the more recent *Redefining Realness: My Path to Womanhood* (2014) by Janet Mock, *Trans: A Memoir* (2015) by Juliet Jacques, and *Tomorrow Will Be Different: Love, Loss, and the Fight for Trans Equality* (2018) by Sarah McBride, trans authors have provided powerful accounts on the complexities of gender, media representation, intersectionality and activism.

Although autobiography will never cease to be the predominant frame for narrating the self, the merging of fiction and life-writing composed by and for trans individuals responds to a wider need for negating the “strip or be stripped” expectation that Juliet Jacques talks about in her insightful article “Forms of Resistance: Uses of Memoir, Theory, and Fiction in Trans Life Writing” (2017). Drawing from her own experience in memoir writing, she argues the following: “But for all the ways in which I tried to resist the formal limitations of memoir, I still had the fundamental problem that Feinberg described two decades earlier. Every chapter I sent to my editor came back with a request to be ‘more personal’” (Jacques, “Forms” 366). Jordy Rosenberg (2021) reinforces this point about “[t]he demand for an auto-fictive impulse from trans people – and the tacit enforcement of this norm by

publishers”, arguing that “[t]he vexations of trans memoir and trans self-reflexivity are of course dusty old questions that continue to dog us – a seemingly ineradicable refrain. [...] In other words, we are only allowed to write creatively when we attest to our own authenticity” (“Afterword” 271).

The belief that trans writers can produce only factual narratives is not only extremely limiting in social and political terms but also in aesthetic and literary value. When self-writing is also framed by fiction, it allows for a deeper exploration of the complexities and nuances of gender and identity, through dense character and context study that literature enables. As Imogen Binnie, the author of *Nevada* (2013), has argued when asked⁴⁵ about her novel: “It’s wildly infuriating when people assume it’s autobiographical. It feels like the subtext is that trans people can’t write” —and, by extension, that trans people can’t create characters and stories remarkable or adequate enough to reach a wider audience and not a very limited “niche”, so to speak.

The Body as a Component of Characterisation

Two years after the publication of Prosser’s seminal book and seven years after Feinberg’s novel, Daniel Punday published his 2000 article “A Corporeal Narratology?” which was then formed into the 2003 book-length study *Narrative Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Narratology*. Punday argues for the conception of the body as a narratological category that can potentially enhance narrative poetics and shed light on categories such as plot, characterisation and temporality, among others. As far as characterisation is concerned, its significance firstly lies in “distinguishing bodies from other objects” or “nonbodies” (Punday, *Narrative Bodies* 58). To illustrate this point,

⁴⁵ Haron Walker, “Have you Read *Nevada*?” New York Magazine.

he uses as a case study Marge Piercy's science fiction novel *He, She and It*, which tells the story of a human female who falls in love with a human-like robot who possesses characteristics from both sexes. Thereby, the story thinks about both gender relations as well as considering what a body is. Punday argues that "[o]ur difficulty in knowing how to read the novel comes from our inability to decide whether Yod's body counts as a human body. Is this the story of an illicit but emotionally valid human relationship?

Is this a cautionary tale about the human dependence on technology and our loss of understanding of our own bodies? As this example suggests, one of the essential conditions for meaningful narrative is to sort bodies from nonbodies" (Punday, *Narrative Bodies* 58). The contemplation of "what counts as a (human) body" seems pertinent in the context of *Stone Butch Blues* and the discussion surrounding "the demand of trans authenticity" (Rosenberg, "Afterword" 274) and the connection between gender and genre. In thinking about Jess's gender-non-conforming body, and whether it is normative or "human" enough, we also attempt to classify and think about the text's generic body. Put differently, depending on how one reads Jess's gender (namely, the way that her corporeality is expressed and represented in the narrative), as "real" enough or not, one reads the text as equally "real" (namely, as an autobiography) or fictional (namely, as fiction).

How real or fictional is a transgender body that eschews conforming to either sex, but finds home in gendered liminality? Is such embodiment "human" enough? Or is it so far from the normative, biologically-determined nature of human subjectivity that it can be considered unnatural and nonhuman? The questions regarding the corporeal identity of the protagonist lead to and feed into the questions of the generic

identity of the narrative per se; if such a body exists, and is indeed real enough and not fictional, then the narrative can be more easily read as and pass as a real story, as an autobiography based on Feinberg's own life experiences. However, if the liminal body is not convincing enough, does not pass as real, as humanly-possible enough, then the narrative is read as fictional, as made up; as a novel. This parallelism, then, ultimately leads to the question of authenticity and the discursive body: what kind of pressure does the body put on the narrative to prove trans authenticity?

"Before a body can be given a meaning", Punday argues, "it must be contrasted to all other objects that are not to be considered bodies" (*Narrative Bodies* 68). This is realised in a reversed manner in the novel, as the protagonist's body is one akin to non-body, in that Jess's physical existence is reduced to her non-intelligible gender which deprives her of her humanness and assimilated social existence. Thus, her embodied identity is only "given meaning" after as well as in the process of being continuously regarded as non-intelligible, as non-normative. She is perceived through the way she looks and is perpetually othered since childhood: "Hey, Pansy! Are you a boy or a girl?" (Feinberg 11), "Where're you going, lezzie? I mean, Jezzie?" (Feinberg 39), "You dirty Kike bitch, you fucking bulldagger" (40).

The discrimination and harassment she faces escalate when she leaves school as a teenager and begins immersing herself in Buffalo's nightlife, finding her community in the city's lesbian bar. Her butch gender presentation not only confounds heterosexual and non-queer individuals but also incurs legal repercussions, as homosexuality remains illegal in the 40s. Her gender expression and embodiment are seen as monstrous, as freakish, exemplifying—in Punday's words—the "semantic use

of this kind of gender distinction" (*Narrative Bodies* 63). And even if Jess "[feels] like a non-person" (Feinberg 188), as well as being treated as such, her trans existence is perceived as over-embodied, as hyperbolically somatic, thereby disrupting the potentiality of assimilation and the conventionality of gender-conforming existence.

In reading *Stone Butch Blues* through the lens of corporeal narratology, one must also consider the "degree of embodiment", a concept which designates "how closely we must associate the characters with these bodies" (Punday, *Narrative Bodies* 66). By attributing significance to the individuality of a character's body, to the extent that their corporeal existence alone contributes to their characterisation, we can explore the narrative concerns raised by the text itself. In Feinberg's case, such a concern is related to the dialogic relationship between gender and genre, which is realised through the relationality between the corporeal body and the discursive/narrative body. As Punday argues, "the bodies within texts thus become a means of negotiating the legibility of the textual artifact" (*Narrative Bodies* 155), while at the same time, those same bodies characterise the texts to which they belong. By "characterise" I mean, again, the act of *charactirisein* (*χαρακτηρίζειν*), namely, of describing the distinctive nature or features of someone or something. The main implication of the mutual consideration of genre and gender for *Stone Butch Blues* lies in the concept of authenticity as mirrored both in the narrative's content and its form.

In terms of the novel's content, Jess's characterisation is largely dependent on her connection to her body. Put differently, the novel's character development and construction, which are analogous to the character's progressive reclamation of her gender as her embodied identity, is what encompasses the story throughout. This way,

the body can be regarded as a component of the narrative, as its individuality is what shapes and gives form to the characterisation of the protagonist. When Jess starts telling her own life story, after the letter to Theresa which frames the novel's main narrative, she starts with the following, rendering her body the locus of attention:

I didn't want to be different. I longed to be everything grownups wanted, so they would love me. I followed all their rules, tried my best to please. But there was something about me that made them knit their eyebrows and frown. No one ever offered a name for what was wrong with me. That's what made me afraid it was really bad. I only came to recognize its melody through this constant refrain: "Is that a boy or a girl?" (Feinberg 7)

These first introductory lines prologue Jess's story by centring on the component (namely, the body) that shapes not only the narrative but also the character development. Not only, then, is the body the novel's main theme, but more significantly it is the element that filters characterisation as it constitutes the main lens through which the main character is represented.

One of the first indicators of the body's role in characterisation is the materiality of the title: "Stone Butch Blues". The term "stone butch" is a 1940s and 1950s term used to describe a lesbian who displays female butchness or traditional masculinity and who does not desire and/or allow to be touched sexually in a receptive way. The rigid materiality of "stone" is accompanied by the fluidity and sensitivity of "blues" to designate the complex and lonesome identity of stone butch lesbians who often have to mask their sensitivity to appear harsh and unbreakable. Roshaya Rodness, in her essay titled "Hard Road Ahead: Stone's Queer Agency in *Stone Butch*

Blues (2020), argues that the role that stone serves in the novel is to “point toward a realm of nonhuman persistence that functionally refuses the language of anthropocentric gender expression as it expands the possibilities for living an irrepressibly ‘hard’ life” (549). Rather than being defined through contrast with objects that are not considered human bodies, as Punday describes (*Narrative Bodies* 68), Jess’s body is instead signified through its comparison to and resonance with the nonhuman materiality of stone—“revealing the power of geological and ecological entities to decompose humans’ rigid categorizations and to affirm forms of relational and affective being grounded in the impenetrable and opaque qualities of stone” (Rodness 549).

When used by the protagonist to self-identify, the phrase “stone butch” is not simply a descriptor of her appearance, sexuality or gender, but also her behavioral and character attributes. Stoneness is not only a survival mechanism against the atrocities of everyday life, but more importantly is the *embodiment* of Jess’s *response* to those—past and present—hardships, “to the assaults and intrusions of authorities, disclosing patterns of violence that are seen to be perpetrated by a toxic system and not rogue reagents” (Rodness 554). In contrast, when she identifies her stone nature in relation to her partner, Jess often says that Theresa is the only one to have sensed “when [she] was about to petrify like stone” and always managed to “melt [her] stone” (Feinberg 132). By mentioning that Theresa “treated [her] stone self as a wound that needed loving healing” (4), Jess exemplifies the embodiment of the trauma in solid rock, which hides “how powerless [she] really [feels] inside” (2).

Elsewhere, one of the other characters, Edna, characterises Jess as a “granite butch”, as a stone butch that can’t “soften [her] edges” as it isn’t “in [her] nature” (231). And yet, paradoxically, “transitivity” is inherent to stone, which “often change[s] state, variously hardening, melting, accumulating, and vanishing”—a quality mirrored in Jess herself, who “solidifies as a strategy for surviving the brutal abuses of power” and “melt[s] upon extended contact with loving femmes” (Rodness 552). Thus, the materiality of gender, conceptualised as “stoneness” in Feinberg’s novel—a non-human trait with which the trans nonconforming body both resonates and *identifies*—positions the body as a narrative component and the central lens through which the protagonist’s characterisation is shaped. As a site of continual transformations, the materiality of “stone” reflects Jess’s internal shifts and evolving states in response to her relationships and sociopolitical environments. This quality of “transivity” (Rodness 552) is further embodied in Jess through her non-conforming transition, which takes shape as a liminal, autotelic form of gender embodiment.

Liminality

As Aren Aizura observes in *Mobile Subjects: Transnational Imaginaries of Gender Reassignment* (2018), the concept of mobility plays a central role in transgender narratives and in broader discourses surrounding the experience of transition. He notes that, in fact, “the normative Euro-American category of trans subjectivity, becomes intelligible as a modern concept through its staging as a journey through ‘elsewhere’ spaces” (*Mobile Subjects* 3). These spaces are marked by their temporariness, functioning as transitional bridges between a person’s pre- and post-transition self; as such, their inhabitation is rendered “intolerable under the law of

heteronormative binary gender”, yet remains essential for “narrating the seeming impossibility of gendered transformation” (Aizura, *Mobile Subjects* 3). However, in *Stone Butch Blues*, the liminal space between genders is not depicted as a site of involuntary, temporary inhabitation, but rather as a desired and deliberately chosen mode of embodied existence. In the novel’s context, then, Aizura’s “trans mobility” (*Mobile Subjects* 15) signifies a deliberate movement toward the “elsewhere” of liminality.

Yet liminality is not immediately recognised or achieved as the desired “end” state in the novel. Initially, Jess decides to take hormones to be read as a man, rendering the concept of passing a sociopolitical survival mechanism: “I just don’t know how to go on anymore. This is the only way I can think of I can still be me and survive. I just don’t know any other way” (Feinberg 159). Although her goal is not to be a man, unlike one of her butch lesbian friends for instance, she longs to start passing as one. She assures Theresa that she will “still be a butch [...] [e]ven on hormones” (163) and will still be identifying as a he-she. For Jess, not feeling like a woman does not automatically mean that she feels like a man. When one of her friends asks her how she knows that she is not a transsexual, Jess responds with one of the novel’s most characteristic lines: “I don’t feel like a man trapped in a woman’s body. I just feel trapped” (171).

After many months of hormone therapy and working out at the gym, Jess starts fully passing as a man yet feels utterly detached from her sense of selfhood.

I feel like a ghost [...]. Like I’ve been buried alive. As 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. No one really sees me or speaks to me or touches me.
(231)

As much as I loved my beard as part of my body, I felt trapped behind it. What I saw reflected in the mirror was not a man, but I couldn't recognize the he-she. My 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 my surface. [...] I hadn't just believed that passing would hide me. I hoped that it would allow me to express the part of myself that didn't seem to be woman. I didn't get to explore being a he-she, though. I simply became a he - a man without a past." (240-241)

It is only when she decides to detransition, that she is able to identify with her gender expression, as her "body [is] blending gender characteristics" (244), finding a home in the space between the "no longer" and the "not yet". A year after ceasing hormone therapy and pursuing electrolysis for her facial hair, her embodiment finally resists rigid categorisation and intelligibility, becoming a safe space to be. While recognising that transitioning and passing was what saved her life, her desire to do "more than to just barely exist" (243) is the catalyst for her detransition and the relocation to that space in between gendered embodiments.

What enables Jess to transition anew is identifying the non-impossibility of another way of embodiment prior to her actually embodying this new liminal existence. This line of reasoning is related to what Grave Lavery calls the "egg theory"; a metaphorical framework concerning transition, according to which "[o]ne only becomes an egg in retrospect, when one has hatched, and the chick has emerged"

(“Egg Theory’s Early Style” 384). The concept of the “egg” is inherently retrospective and temporally displaced, as to be identified as an egg implies that one has already transitioned beyond that state and, especially, that one is not an egg anymore (Lavery, “Egg Theory’s Early Style” 384). In *Stone Butch Blues*, this notion is reframed in a dual manner: the term “egg” captures both Jess’s initial transition from female to male and her transition to “she-he” later on. In this framing, detransition is not a reversal but rather a continuation of the transition process—another stage of emergence, another “egg”.

Grace Lavery draws on Sybil Lamb’s 2008 punk manifesto “You Best Never Ever Tr*nsition, Tr*nny!” to illustrate how Lamb’s work exemplifies the principles of egg theory, even if it does not name them directly. At one point, Lavery highlights Lamb’s critique of *Stone Butch Blues*:

How ‘bout being a Shemale?? That’s pretty close to a tr*nsexual, but less all-jittery-in –tears, cuz she-males at least own their shit. Or remember Les, the Stone Butch Blues guy?? He’s my fucking hero cuz Stone Butch was all about how freaking scary and upsetting tr*nsexual life is, and after forcing himself through 20 years of loneliness and workplace discrimination he called bullshit and ripped his beard out with tweezers and proclaimed himself neither-yet-both. We gotta do what we gotta do.⁴⁶

According to Lavery, Lamb’s critical interpretation of Feinberg’s novel highlights its positioning “as a futurological egg theory, the post-detransition text that completes

⁴⁶ “‘You Best Never Ever Tr*Nsition, Tr*nny!’ by Sybil Lamb (2008)”, *Tumblr*, uploaded by topsidepress-blog.

the cycle of foreclosure” (“Egg Theory’s Early Style” 387). In this context, although I acknowledge Lavery’s critique of the novel, I interpret the characterisation of “futurological” in relation to *Stone Butch Blues* and egg theory as a forward-looking concept, one that envisions the potential for embodying a state of liminality that has not yet been realised. In other words, while egg theory is typically retrospective, focused on an already materialised state of being, in *Stone Butch Blues*, it takes on a speculative quality; rather than being defined by a “hatched present” (Lavery, “Egg Theory’s Early Style” 385) and viewed in hindsight, Jess’s detransition is framed from a pre-hatched moment. Thus, the novel’s gender non-conforming somatic body (which encapsulates the “futurological egg theory”) becomes a narrative component in shaping the characterisation—in its dual sense—of the novel’s discursive body, specifically through its embodiment of the “post-detransition text”.

The “transivity” toward liminality extends into other aspects of the story, paralleling Jess’s gender non-conforming embodiment. As a gender non-conforming person who initially identifies and passes as lesbian at a time when homosexuality is still illegal in America, she constantly exists in the liminal space between safety and danger, in the threshold between life and death, as illustrated in the following passage:

Ed and I spun around for a split second. Funny, it seemed as though we had plenty of time to consult. There are times, the old bulls told me, when it’s best to take your beating and hope the cops will leave you on the ground when they are done with you. Other times your life may be in danger, or your sanity, and it’s worth it to try to fight it back. It’s a tough call. (Feinberg 98)

And during most of those instances, she holds another liminal space for self-preservation: dissociation. Between consciousness and unconsciousness, the disconnection from her surroundings and feelings is the means to mental and physical survival:

Staring at that jail light bulb rescued me from watching my own degradation: I just went away. I found myself standing in the desert. The sky was streaked with color. Every shift of light cast a different hue across the wildness: salmon, rose lavender. (65-66)

When somatic pain is what embodies her existence, she searches for “that floating opening between the dimensions [she’d] passed through before” (66)—a safe space between reality and non-reality until the pain is over: “I couldn’t make it stop, I couldn’t escape it, and so I pretended it wasn’t happening. I looked at the sky, at how pale and placid it was. I imagined it was the ocean and the clouds were white-capped waves” (40).

Liminality manifests in other ways throughout the novel, linking the thematic and structural dimensions of the concept to the narrative form. In particular, the novel begins in *medias res*, in the middle of the plot, opening Jess’s story with a liminal state of existence between past and present, between what has already happened (which is yet unknown to the reader) and what is about to be narrated. In addition, the novel also opens with Jess’s letter to her former partner, another in-between state. Later in the story, after Jess and Theresa break up, Jess says that there are so many unspoken things between them, things she “could [never] find the words” for (165). This is when Theresa urges her to write her a letter someday, the same letter that the narrative

opens with. In the threshold between what has been told and what hasn't, between confession and silence, lies the liminal space which introduces Jess's story.

Jordy Rosenberg (2021) suggests that the letter to Theresa invites a metafictional reading—an impression further heightened by the Afterword in the 10th anniversary edition, which is also written in the second person. This mirroring between the letter and the Afterword creates a bridge between the addressee of the letter (Theresa) and the reader of the 2003 edition, as both are asked where they are and what they are doing at the moment of reading (Rosenberg, "Afterword" 271). At the same time, the letter can be read as autofictive, connecting Feinberg's personal circumstances in 1993, at the time of the novel's original publication, with those of 2003, at the time of the novel's 10th anniversary, functioning "as an aleatory apostrophe from Feinberg to Feinberg himself – a noirish, meta, and auto-fictional supplement to the body of text" (Rosenberg, "Afterword" 271). Resembling a "kind of poetic apostrophe", the 2003 Afterword "dramatises hir projected 'situation' after death as a kind of utopian de-alienation of cultural worker from hir labour" (Rosenberg, "Afterword" 273).

What Rosenberg highlights here is Feinberg's imagined reunion with hir work, as made possible by the lifting of copyright "and the escape of corporate ownership", allowing *Stone Butch Blues* to be freely distributed through the author's website, even after hir death ("Afterword" 273). Viewed through such a political lens, Rosenberg ultimately interprets the text, and especially its Afterword, not as an instance of autofiction, but as a poetics. The intimate address from Jess to Theresa, when read alongside Feinberg's address to the reader in the Afterword, exemplifies what

Rosenberg terms “apostrophe’s most utopian modality” as it carries significant political implications, gesturing toward “the abolition of alienation, a horizon resolved not in the diegesis of the novel, but in the poetics of its paratext”, ten years after its original publication (“Afterword” 273). In this sense, the discursive body of the novel is given shape by means of its own narrative form (specifically, via the dialogue between the Afterword and the letter), which is rendered a corporeal extension of Feinberg’s lived reality. This vision gestures toward a utopian embodiment, where the labor of writing is no longer estranged from the body that produced it—a vision made possible because the discursive body of the text serves as the site where the somatic body is not only invoked but politically refigured.

Furthermore, another state of liminality that links the thematic with the structural, and serves as a significant moment of the story, is Jess’s dream that mirrors her desired non-conforming gender expression. In that dream, her chest is flat and she has a beard, without however being portrayed as a man. When Theresa asks her about it, she says that her difference, her otherness in that dream, is what she enjoyed the most, despite the fact that all her life beforehand she strove for assimilation: “It was about something old in me. All my life I didn’t want to feel different. But in the dream I was with other people who were different like me. [...] That’s the strange part. I didn’t feel like a woman or a man, and I liked how I was different” (153-154). The liminal space of dreaming—existing between two levels of consciousness—represents a realm of revelation and self-discovery for Jess. Through this dream, she stands on the threshold of her true identity, transitioning from her former, gender-conforming self to her future, non-conforming self, such that liminality operates both as a state

between the conscious and subconscious and as an expression of her desire for liminal embodiment.

Finally, the novel concludes as it began—within a liminal state. While the opening sequence is framed by Theresa’s letter, the ending returns to a dream, echoing the earlier one in many ways: a vision of Jess surrounded by others like her, whose shared otherness becomes the very means through which she seeks assimilation: “There were people who were different like me inside. We could all see our reflections in the faces of those who sat in this circle. It was hard to say who was a woman and who was a man. [...] I was proud to be one of them” (329). Just like Jess feels that “[her] whole life [is] coming full circle”, the novel itself enacts this circularity through its liminal structure: it opens in medias res with a letter suspended between past and future—what has happened and what is yet to happen—and it closes within another liminal state—a dream space between the conscious and the subconscious. Returning to Aizura, it is not only the somatic body within the novel that seeks “trans mobility” (*Mobile Subjects* 15) toward the “elsewhere” of liminality (*Mobile Subjects* 3), but also the discursive body—through the novel’s narrative structure—that occupies and articulates this liminal space. This dual liminal embodiment enables the narration of what Aizura calls “the seeming impossibility of gendered transformation”, exemplified in the novel by Jess’s non-conforming transness (*Aizura, Mobile Subjects* 3).

The Authenticity Hypothesis

But how does the liminal body ultimately become what Punday calls “a means of negotiating the legibility of the textual artifact”? (*Narrative Bodies* 155) By engendering the question of narrative authenticity. Feinberg’s proposition that a body

can exist within the boundaries of biological points of reference—deliberately inhabiting the liminal “elsewhere” (Aizura, *Mobile Subjects* 3)—begs the question of whether this is acceptable or “real enough”. The question of reality and authenticity arises as a question of genre and form: Does a narrative such as this reflect reality, and if so, does that classify the book as an autobiographical portrayal of Feinberg’s personal gender struggles? To what extent is *Stone Butch Blues* fictional or non-fictional? Ultimately, Jess’s transgender body is the element of the plot which shapes the novel’s generic interpretation in two directions (fiction and non-fiction) and applies pressure to the narrative’s authenticity.

The relationship between the discursive (textual) and the corporeal (protagonist’s) body is captured by what Punday contends in *Narrative Bodies*: “I have argued that the ‘objectness’ of the text and the characters represented within it becomes an issue as soon as our traditional ways of thinking about authority begin to erode. We are challenged to find a position from which to view them, and are caught up within a system of circulation and constant narrative movement. [T]his movement can be traced back to the nature of the body itself” (162). In reading Jess’s gender non-conforming embodiment, we also wonder about Feinberg’s personal embodied identity to make the final call on the embodiment of the text, thereby considering authenticity in three relevant dimensions; the authenticity of the protagonist, the author and the text per se.

To elucidate this connection further, I turn to Punday once again and particularly his use of reader response theory to illuminate the body’s role as an element in the narrative plot through the involvement of both author and reader. He

argues that “narratology is itself a narrative production” and reads “the narratology of reader response criticism” as “simply the next stage of narrative plot”, since “it thus continues the tradition of using the body to mark the gap between overarching and resisting narrative orders” (*Narrative Bodies* 112). Through narrative concepts, such as the implied reader, that signify the process of reading the text, the narrative itself through the reader's response theory constructs a(nother) “story”; namely, an extension of the textual one, that is based on the assumption that there are narratological concepts that are so closely related to the texts’ plot under consideration that they potentially have the capacity to broaden its interpretation and meaning inference. In the case of Feinberg’s novel, the attempt of the narrative theorist to apply a specific generic characterisation to the book, be it autofiction, bildungsroman, semi-autobiography, transfiction, etc., or anything in-between, inherently accords different interpretations to the narrative based on the specific connotations that each characterisation entails.

Drawing from Wolfgang Iser’s concept of “horizon” in his *The Act of Reading* (1980), Punday emphasises the reader’s corporeality as a meaning-inference factor which, depending on the body’s “experience of physical location,” exposes the limitations of reading and interpretation (*Narrative Bodies* 114). Through his reading of Iser’s work from a corporeal narratological perspective, Punday understands Iser’s concept as a “metaphoric bodily horizon” which illustrates how the reader’s body is responsible for limiting one’s view of the literary text. I aim to take this a step further in the context of my analysis of Feinberg’s novel and argue that the interpretation of the discursive body of *Stone Butch Blues* is dependent on the reader’s horizon of

expectation based on the assumptions they make about the represented body of the protagonist on the basis of its characterisation.

To illustrate this point, I draw from Iser's conception of reading as a constant negotiation between text and reader in his seminal "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach" (1972). According to his theory, the text's correlative sentences form a set of expectations or "pre-intentions", which are activated through the reader's imagination ("The Reading Process" 282). As a result, "the interaction of these correlatives [is] not [...] a fulfilment of the expectation so much as a continual modification of it" (Iser, "The Reading Process" 282). It would be impossible as well as pointless if the readers' expectations were fully fulfilled, as it would designate that the respective text under question could be narrowed down to "the individualization of a given expectation" and thus its horizon would be significantly limited (Iser, "The Reading Process" 283). Considering Iser's theory in the context of *Stone Butch Blues*, one can easily see how the set of expectations accorded to the text by the reader can be easily left unfulfilled or, more precisely, easily challenged.

The novel comes with many "pre-intentions" regarding the protagonist's gender and existence, most potentially pointing at gender transition in its conventional and binary-determined gender-conforming sense. However, Jess's story is neither a typical FTM narrative nor a typical detransition one. The protagonist's existence in gendered liminality is Feinberg's way of subverting the readers' expectations by authentically foregrounding a story about what it means to not conform and to find peace between presumed points of reference.

Strangely enough, we feel that any confirmative effect – such as we implicitly demand of expository texts, as we refer to the objects they are meant to present – is a defect in a literary text. For the more a text individualizes or confirms an expectation it has initially aroused, the more aware we become of its didactic purpose, so that at best we can only accept or reject the thesis forced upon us. More often than not, the very clarity of such texts will make us want to free ourselves from their clutches. (“The Reading Process” 283)

As Iser puts it, this process of constant “modification” of expectations is rendered possible through each sentence that succeeds its preceded ones, which has a “retrospective effect on what has already been read” (“The Reading Process” 283). The act of reading is, thus, comprised of continuous and successive moments of significance which simultaneously shape the readers’ expectations and modify them by retrospectively interacting with the moments of significance that came before them. Similarly, as the narrative of *Stone Butch Blues* begins, one expects that Jess is born in the wrong body, experiencing gender dysphoria and the inability to fit in with other girls her age because of her transness. However, as the story progresses, it becomes evident that she is unable to truly identify with the opposite sex either, discovering how dysphoric it once again feels to strive to “fit in” anew. This way, the readers’ expectations are challenged, as the text confronts its readers with a nuanced view of gender that doesn’t align with any presumption.

In addition, I argue that the reader’s expectations are also challenged by means of Feinberg’s manifestation of what Grace Lavery calls “trans realism” in *Pleasure and Efficacy: Of Pen Names, Cover Versions, and Other Trans Techniques* (2023).

Specifically, Lavery's term reconceptualises what is medically referred to as gender dysphoria—and what Janet Mock (2013) calls “surrender[ing] to the brilliance” (258)—by redefining it as “the overwhelming feeling that one's body is not sexed adequately and that one's claim on the world depends on a self-shattering of that fact”, arguing that “the method by which it is accessed is not experimentation but submission, not appropriation but surrender” (*Pleasure and Efficacy* 5).

In tracing the rhetoric of “realness” within both literary realism and psychoanalysis—specifically through the works of George Eliot and Sigmund Freud—Lavery argues that both fields seek to persuade their audience (whether readers or patients) to reject “a beautiful fantasy” and confront an unsettling truth “about the inadequacy of their own material existence” (*Pleasure and Efficacy* 4). In this process, the Romantic ideal of “making the desirable possible” is reconfigured by realism into the belief that “the possible [is], after all, desirable” (4). This is especially relevant in the context of *Stone Butch Blues*, where Feinberg's protagonist “surrenders” to her “trans realness” by consciously rejecting what Lavery describes as “the social coding of the sexed body” (*Pleasure and Efficacy* 5), and intentionally inhabits a gender-nonconforming space.

The bildungsroman aspect of Feinberg's novel brings this process of reconfiguration forth, since this generic class perfectly reflects, in Iser's words, “the way in which we gather experience in life” (“The Reading Process” 286). As the plot progresses and the protagonist grows up, from childhood to puberty and adolescence, the reader grows along with her, so to speak, and becomes virtually susceptible to the same life experiences that lead to the reclamation of her identity. Hence, the reading

process and the continual retrospection and modification of sentences from the standpoint of the reader are akin to Jess's process of reflecting on and re-considering her identity. For the reader to accept Jess's liminal existence is to "suspend the ideas and attitudes that shape [their] own personality before [they] can experience the unfamiliar world of the literary text" ("The Reading Process" 296).

But what changes depending on whether we read Jess's story as fiction or autobiography? How can the reader-response theory illuminate that distinction—if at all? As Iser argues, a part of the process of engaging with the unfamiliar in the reading act is "the identification of the reader with what [they] rea[d]", namely, "the establishment of affinities between oneself and someone outside oneself – a familiar ground on which we are able to experience the unfamiliar" (296). Sexuality, gender, found family, working class and sexual trauma are some of the threads that weave the potential different "affinities" between the reader's life experiences and Jess's story, which can potentially make Feinberg's text even partially akin to other queer people's personal narratives. In using the word "queer" to characterise a particular type of reader, I am of course not implying that only queer individuals read *Stone Butch Blues* or that a certain verisimilitude is a prerequisite to connecting with the/any book. However, it is more likely that the aforesaid "affinities" will be easier to form when the reader is not heterosexual or gender-conforming.

But even if this is indeed the case, those established "affinities" are only a medium towards engaging with Feinberg's narrative, as they assist the reader in navigating the "unfamiliar" aspects of the story that defy any presumed expectations that even many queer people have of what it means to transition. Even then, the

protagonist's body, which exists in the liminal space between genders and refuses to conform to either one, remains largely unfamiliar and causes tension in its illegibility. Equally, the discursive body of *Stone Butch Blues*—namely, the body of the text—mirrors this tension by means of its *genre*-non-conforming identity. Put differently, not only is Jess's transgender embodiment unintelligible, but so too is *Stone Butch Blues*' textual embodiment.

Another way to think of this, is to consider Punday's wider argument on reader response theory in relation to the characters' embodiment, according to which the less embodied a character is in any given narrative, the easier it becomes for the reader to identify with them. In contrast, the more specific the embodiment, the more likely the reader's exclusion from the embodied subject. Orsolya Rákai in "Corporeal narratology and strangeness: further considerations of a contextual narratology" (2015) encapsulates this argument perfectly: "Punday demonstrates that the level of the body's textual markedness is important, because it determines how easy it is for the reader to identify with a certain person. In his opinion, the less explicitly marked a body is in a story, the easier it is to identify with it – the more accentuated the bodiliness is, the more difficult the identification process is" (10). In that regard, the body in *Stone Butch Blues* is "marked" in a dual way. Firstly, it is textually marked by the text's generic identity, in that the authenticity of the gender non-conforming body is dependent on how the discursive body of the narrative is read and perceived. The embodiment of non-conformity in the story puts pressure on the narrative to prove authenticity based on how real and acceptable such embodiment is in life outside of the novel.

Secondly, the somatic body in Feinberg's text embodies and at the same time is marked by various intersections of otherness that underline its liminal existence. Both types of "marking" result in an accentuated bodiliness that creates tension and challenges the readers' presumptions, expectations and, ultimately, identification process. And this is where corporeal narratology seems pertinent in the study of *Stone Butch Blues*, as—in the words of Rákai—"corporeal narratology doesn't regard narrator(s) and characters as speaking subjects: it starts with what the speaking subject tries to suppress, to surmount and to overwrite – the body, the dynamic textual traces of the body" (10), thereby foregrounding and rendering Jess's liminal embodiment as the narrative itself. As a consequence, the somatic body becomes the discursive body, in the sense that it is being read not as an inferior, extratextual characteristic that partially contributes to the narrative's interpretation, but as the narrative itself, as the locus of signification per se.

The way that this is narratologically pursued in narrative analysis is by asking "how" the body is constructed rather than "what" the body looks or behaves like, with the purpose of ultimately shedding light on the "process-like character of identity" (Rákai 14). This shift in analytical focus is especially important in the context of a trans novel, where much of narrative theory tends to emphasise the trans character's physical image and often centres on "what everything looks like", so to speak, not in terms of the character's gender expression, but rather on the image of their genitalia and various secondary sex characteristics. Another significant aspect of such a standpoint is—in the words of Rákai—the eschewing of "classifying individual cases into a group [...] (e.g. "national culture", "women literature", "religious group", etc.)" and of "generalizing them" (14), but rather the reinforcement of an individualising and

individualised focus on corporeality. Given the tendency to group transgender individuals into one homogenous group that supposedly entails all different representations of transness, it is pivotal that the body in *Stone Butch Blues* is examined in/for its individuality with the intention of characterisation. In doing so, the analytical focus is centred on embodied difference, “mak[ing] visible”, as Rákai contends, “how the narration defines and reinforces borders between groups or individuals, or how [a narrative can] transpose those borders” (14).

Escaping the Transsexual Plot

But there is another reason why such an approach to the trans body matters in Feinberg’s novel, and why the dialogic relationship between the authenticity of the physical body and the authenticity of the discursive body is important. Kate Drabinski explains in “Incarnate Possibilities: Female to Male Transgender Narratives and the Making of Self” (2014) the concept of “transnormativity” which is used to describe the narratives in the 1950s that reproduced “the transexual experience in normative ways to gain access to treatment” (309). These narratives formed a very particular sense of what being transgender means and looks like, identifying very normative, monolithic and medicalised ways of diagnosing transsexuality. This idea is echoed by Jules Gill-Peterson, who identifies “the singularization of transness into a narrative of binary transition” as “the signature effect of the medical model” (130).

However, the limitations of such a discourse were particularly important, as they exposed the need for perpetuating autobiographical writing for transgender individuals more than ever before and resulted in “the production and proliferation of new forms of self-telling that potentially resist and challenge the tropes of earlier trans

autobiographies” (Drabinski 311). This is exactly where the significance of *Stone Butch Blues*’ generic liminality lies as well; through this “very thinly disguised autobiography”, to echo the words of the author himself once more, Feinberg manages to resist and challenge normative understandings of transgender existence by foregrounding another perspective of what it means to identify outside of your assigned gender while finding home in gendered liminality. Feinberg’s narrative does not follow nor repeat the normative discourse about self-identifying, which stems from the concept of “being born in the wrong body”, but rather exemplifies the significance of authentic gendered embodiment and the validity of individual subjectivity.

And yet, there seems to be a certain pressure accorded to narratives like Feinberg’s to “prove” their authenticity by admitting to their autobiographical status. John Paul Riquelme in “Modernist Transformations of Life Writing: From Wilde and Woolf to Bechdel and Rushdie” (2013) argues that certain narratives that are encompassed by fluidity (like Feinberg’s, in our case) “present challenges to the assertion that readers know” exactly what kind of narrative they are engaging with—(auto)biographical or fictional (464). This entailed fluidity creates tension in the reader’s reception of the narrative and makes the point that one does not (and cannot) always know the particular generic category that the text under consideration pertains to. Likewise, the same point can be made about the trans body. It cannot always be registered as such and even when it can, it is most often subjected to an evaluative gaze regarding the body’s anatomy, causing its “readers” a particular tension based on the difficulty in accurately identifying the trans individual’s sex. Therefore, the trans

body “present[s] [equal] challenges to the assertion that readers know” exactly what kind of body they are engaging with.

Moreover, another type of pressure that the body puts on the narrative to prove authenticity is related to what Prosser calls “the transsexual plot” (*Second Skins* 178). This kind of plot describes a presumed and predefined kind of transition, which is calibrated by linearity, gender-affirming surgeries, the ultimate goal of passing and social assimilation, and—most importantly—closure. The transsexual plot ends with repletion, with the satisfaction of reaching your final destination, without any loose ends. *Stone Butch Blues* does not denounce the transsexual plot, but does not conform fully to it either; it follows it almost entirely, until the moment of realisation that gender ambivalence is the preferred “goal”, the desired final destination. It virtually ticks all the boxes, until it doesn’t. Regarding closure, the novel concludes—as previously analysed—with the depiction of a dream, a liminal state that does not provide definitive closure; instead, its open-ended nature almost suggests the possibility of another beginning.

One way that Jess diverts from the traditional “transsexual” narratives is through “externaliz[ing] her transition” by, to echo Prosser, “demonstrat[ing] cogently the cultural significance of passing: how the stone butch’s taking hormones to pass is 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” (*Second Skins* 182). Jess admits that she “can’t survive as a he-she any longer [...] [,] can’t keep up taking the system head-on this way” (Feinberg 158), referring not to her gender dysphoria but to the sociopolitical aspect of non-passing as a man yet existing in a

butch body—of risking her life for her butchness. Her transness is inherent to her he/she-ness, but her decision to transition for survival is Jess’s “attempt to embody her transgender” (Feinberg 183), to reconcile her he/she-ness and transness with her biological body. An additional moment of Jess’s journey that deviates from the transsexual plot is her connection to her past. “As a subject who continues to identify as a transgender woman in the present”, Prosser argues, “Jess remains bound to her actual past. She chooses to keep with her and to make visible – to make consistently readable – the strange familiarity, the ambivalence and liminality of the transgendered, sex-reconfigured stone butch” (*Second Skins* 187).

Furthermore, in the same way that Feinberg’s text escapes conforming to the transsexual plot, it also ceases to conform to a single generic status of either autobiography or fiction, embodying what Prosser calls “a trans genre: a text as between genres as its subject is between genders” (*Second Skins* 191). Feinberg herself, in talking about such an ambiguous approach in relation to gender, contends that fiction enables the transgender individual to preserve not only their personal (hi)story but most importantly their “boundaries of dignity”: “I also felt, as transgendered people, that we’re always told who we are, either physically or emotionally – stripped or be stripped, you know? There’s a way that we get dehumanized. ‘Let’s see your body. We’ll find out who you are’”.⁴⁷ This evokes Juliet Jacques’ statement which I referenced at the beginning of the chapter, according to which her publisher always requested *more* transparency in her submitted chapters (“Forms” 366), more “trans authenticity” (Rosenberg, “Afterword” 274). The type of pressure that the body puts

⁴⁷ Interview with Erika Horwitz, “Politics & Gender”, FTM Newsletter 26.

on the narrative to prove authenticity, then, is the pressure of exposure, of a complete uncovering of the self for the sake of “authentic” writing. The more the transgender author exposes themselves, the more “real” the narrative under consideration is; the more revealed the corporeal body, the more convincing the discursive body.

In the words of Feinberg about his novel: “I really felt that by fictionalizing the story, that I would be able to tell more of the truth; be more brutally honest than I would if I were telling my own story.”⁴⁸ Therefore, the embodiment of the protagonist in *Stone Butch Blues* bears upon the characterisation of the novel’s genre by creating a sense of authenticity that pertains exactly to the text’s generic ambivalence. As Rosenberg (2021) beautifully captures, “[i]f we understand the resistance to the demand for trans authenticity as a kind of poetics” then what the novel offers is “an inhabitation of revolutionariness” (“Afterword” 274), blurring the boundaries between fiction and autobiography to both illuminate and protect the transgender experience, presenting with genuine authenticity and ethical care.

Conclusions

My aim in this chapter was to approach the transgender body in *Stone Butch Blues: A Novel* through its dialogic relationship to the novel’s generic/discursive body, asking how narrative form can reconcile the importance of authentic representation in self-writing with the need for self-protection and non-exposure in trans life-writing. I argued that narrative form enables this co-constitution precisely by inhabiting the liminal space as a merger of fiction and autobiography, protecting the trans body from exposure for the sake of “genuine” writing, thereby not succumbing to what

⁴⁸ Interview with Erika Horwitz, “Politics & Gender”, FTM Newsletter 26.

Rosenberg calls “the demand of trans authenticity” (Afterword” 274). At the same time, the transgender body “tak[es] shape” (Fawaz 54) within its own narrative by resisting abstraction or symbolic fluidity and instead asserting its material, embodied presence through lived experience. Through the lens of corporeal narratology, I argued that Feinberg grants the trans body narrative agency—not by speaking merely *about* it, but by speaking *from* the gender non-conforming, trans somatic body and *through* a genre-defying, trans-generic discursive body—thereby asserting its own material reality.

The contribution of a contextual and, specifically, corporeal narratology to the analysis of *Stone Butch Blues: A Novel* is, as I hope to have demonstrated, of critical significance. Such an approach foregrounds the notion that narrative form is not merely a structural framework but an extension of the trans somatic body itself. In this reading, the body is not simply represented—it is narrativised. Simultaneously, narrative form becomes a site through which different modes of characterisation emerge, with form and character shaping one another in ways that mirror the protagonist’s embodied experience. Jess’s accentuated bodiliness (Punday, *Narrative Bodies* 10)—expressed through her non-conforming trans identity—is inseparable from the novel’s own textual accentuated bodiliness, articulated through its generic ambiguity and formal hybridity. A corporeal narratological lens thus reveals that *Stone Butch Blues* is not only about trans embodiment, but also about how the body becomes an active agent of characterisation—not only character but also narrative construction.

Chapter Six

Generative Affinities: Metafiction and Transgender Identity in *Confessions of the Fox* (2018) by Jordy Rosenberg

Introduction

Having analysed how the genre of life-writing has served to represent trans stories and how *Stone Butch Blues: A Novel* has centred the trans experience within the liminal space between fiction and non-fiction, I will continue the conversation on transgender storytelling and self-reference by examining Jordy Rosenberg's novel *Confessions of the Fox* in relation to the narrative concept of metafiction. Metafiction is regarded as one of the most versatile and interesting concepts of narratological analysis, bringing to the fore some of the radical rhetorical possibilities of fictional texts from the standpoint of formal self-reflection. It draws attention to the self-consciousness of the narrating process, while also employing self-reflexivity as an inherent part of the story that it concurrently constructs. Approached from a rhetorical standpoint, metafiction's constructedness resembles the constructedness of transgender self-reflective narratives, in that the writing process creates and simultaneously embodies the subjectivity of its narrative; the construction of the narrated story is parallel to the construction of the narrated self, since the narrating subject acquires the dual role of being the focal point of its own narrative.

Although the bibliography on *Confessions* remains limited—understandably so, given its 2018 publication—several significant critical approaches have already emerged, including some from a narratological standpoint. Ana Horvat, in their essay “The Trans Archive in Shola von Reinhold's *LOTE* and Jordy Rosenberg's *Confessions of the Fox*” (2025), analyses how trans protagonists function as trans archivists, and

illustrates how “[i]n a Deleuzian take on the structure of archives, Rosenberg and von Reinhold imagine queer and trans futurities in which the past and present merge into one” (12). Gil Mozer in his essay “Transforming Paratext: A Transgender Touch across Time in *Confessions of the Fox*” (2024) analyses the relationship between text and paratext arguing that “Rosenberg reimagines the nature and function of paratext itself, complicating its centrality to both the narrative ‘presenting’ and the temporal ‘making present’ of any individual narrative” (190). Mozer also examines the novel’s contextual paratext through the lens of “trans touch across time” (194), weaving together queer and trans temporalities with narrative analysis.

Ivo Zender in “Desire for Trans Ancestors: An Affective Reading of *Confessions of the Fox*” (2023) explores the intimate and affective entanglement between the written body and the trans body, connecting “authorship of a text and the authorship of one’s gender” (64) through the framework of historiographic metafiction. Meanwhile, Chiara Pellegrini (2022) examines the “ethical erasures” in Rosenberg’s novel, contrasting it with another first-person narrative featuring a gender-variant protagonist, Jeffrey Eugenides’ *Middlesex* (“Decline to Describe” 48). Mozer, Zender, and Pellegrini each approach the novel through a narratological lens, effectively illuminating how elements of its narrative infrastructure (paratext, historiographic metafiction, and first-person narration, respectively) interact with key themes such as trans intelligibility, archiving, community, and authenticity. Although my own work aligns with and draws from these approaches, I will be employing a framework grounded in contextual narratology—primarily rhetorical and feminist—in order to foreground the affinities between metafiction and transgender storytelling and the constitutive function of metafictional narration for trans identity in Rosenberg’s novel.

I argue that the novel's metafictional nature is a significant rhetorical vehicle that allows for a compelling reading of transition and non-normative subjectivity as self-reference and, by extension, self-writing through fiction. Dislocated from a strictly autobiographical and/or factual life-writing context, trans identity and corporeality are approached as a historically collective locus of archived affect that foregrounds the contiguity between form and interpretation. In exploring this interilluminated relationship, my central argument lies in the distinctive elements within Rosenberg's metafiction that align it with transgender themes (like the rejection of rigidity in any binary-bound categorisation and the authenticity and validity of unintelligible identities) and in the ways that these themes are manifested textually.

I situate the interrogation of metafictionality in the context of postmodernism and particularly in the discussion of "historiographic metafiction", a term coined by Linda Hutcheon in *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (2004) to describe "those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet also paradoxically lay claim to historical events and personages" (5). Through the postmodern concept of "the presence of the past", I examine how *Confessions of the Fox* is rendered "fundamentally contradictory, resolutely historical, and inescapably political" by problematising history and simultaneously leaning into it on account of alternative historicity (Hutcheon 4). Additionally, I draw from Patricia Waugh's *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (1984) to consider the ways that the relationship between fiction and reality is generated through metafictional transgender storytelling in Rosenberg's novel.

Moreover, I illustrate how the tools and methodologies of contextual narratology, through the lens of metafiction, can substantially contribute to the analysis and interpretation of thematic and contextual concepts of identity, particularly transgender identity. I frame the rhetoric of fictionality within the framework of rhetorical narratology, viewing it as, in the words of Richard Walsh in *The Rhetoric of Fictionality* (2007), “a bridge between extrinsic and intrinsic criticism, between ideology and formalism, or between the text as symptom and the text as oracle” (6). My approach also departs from Jay Prosser’s *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (1998) and the concept of “reading transsexuality through narrative,” which designates the contiguity between transgender identity and embodiment to narrative form (5).

As I have discussed in the previous chapter of this segment regarding the analysis of Feinberg’s novel, Prosser’s research focuses specifically on autobiography, examining the conjunctions of narrative transition and somatic transition, yet I approach transgender self-referentiality from a fictional rather than factual/autobiographical standpoint on account of metafiction’s aforementioned self-reflexivity, thereby exploring the dialogic relationship between self-writing and the rhetoric of fictionality. While Prosser focuses on the “cohering narrative movement between past and present selves, the ‘I’ of the bios and the ‘I’ of the graph” (*Second Skins* 102) in autobiographical writing, I attend to the notion of narrative transformation and movement within different narrative levels in Rosenberg’s novel. This approach ultimately allows for the “rejoin[ing]” of the former “narrative split into a single, connected ‘life’” (Prosser, *Second Skins* 102) at the final scene of *Confessions*

with the editor's inscription in the manuscript's textual body, illustrating the connection between form and content, narrative discourse and narrated story.

Towards an Alternative Historicity

Confessions of the Fox tells the re-imagined story of Jack Sheppard, the infamous thief of eighteenth-century England. The novel by Jordy Rosenberg comprises a metafictional commentary by a transgender scholar on a lost manuscript, which reveals that the historical figure of Jack Sheppard was a transgender man. As the manuscript is found by Dr R. Voth, he becomes the document's transcriber and decides to bring the character's story to the fore. Along with the "official" manuscript that tells Jack Sheppard's story, the fictive narrative also provides the editor's footnotes throughout his transcription process, offering insights into eighteenth-century England's sociopolitical context, academic observations on the primary text, as well as information on Dr Voth's personal life.

The novel begins directly with the "Editor's Foreword", introducing the reader to the book's metafictional realm by constructing an extradiegetic level. This fictive prologue is composed and signed by Dr R. Voth, the narrator of "Confessions of the Fox", namely, the fully transcribed manuscript that comprises the book that the reader holds in their hands. The narrative levels of the different representational realms are constructed in the novel as follows:

- 1) The extradiegetic level comprises the context for the narrative that unfolds after the foreword; this level's (first-person) narrator, the academic Dr R. Voth, is the fictive editor of the fully transcribed manuscript, namely, "Confessions of the Fox".

2) The first diegetic level comprises the main narrative, namely, Jack Sheppard's story; this level's (third-person) narrator is omniscient, anonymous and tells the main story that derives from eighteenth-century London, to which the footnotes of the second diegetic level refer.

3) The second diegetic level consistently unfolds in the form of footnotes; this level's (first-person) narrator is again Dr R. Voth; however, this time as he processes, reads and transcribes the manuscript, before it fully becomes "Confessions".

Regarding the second narrative level, Dr Voth delineates the trajectory of the manuscript; initially claimed by the University's Dean of Surveillance for profitable sale, it is ultimately taken away by the editor, as a crucial part of his research and a significant collective historical moment, which is revealed only at the novel's conclusion. Finally, the editor shares with the narratee his findings: that Jack Sheppard's "Confessions" does not render a singular memoir but rather a "collective diary-keeping", "[t]he diary of a trace" (Rosenberg 259-260). The manuscript, the editor realises, composes the material of heavily edited texts through centuries of engagement, with the purpose of decolonising aspects of archival history and restoring the power of the communal heterogeneous bodies. Thus, the manuscript is not an original biography of the transgender Jack Sheppard but, instead, a pseudo-biographical text that has been created and ceaselessly edited by collectives of anonymous people. The manuscript is written, edited and reclaimed by and for the systematically oppressed throughout history, "[i]n the name of those who came before, who fought the police; those whose names we know, and those whose names

we can never know. In the name of those who come after, who will never know our names" (316).

The metafictional originality in *Confessions of the Fox* lies not only in the novel's complex and intricate structure but also in metafiction's specific characteristics that render it particularly attuned to transgender themes. To illustrate this argument, I am going to briefly compare Rosenberg's novel with James Hogg's 1824 novel *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, a text that employs similar techniques yet exhibits different rhetorical effects. Hogg's *Confessions* tells the story of Robert Wringhim, a devoted Calvinist who believes he is guaranteed Salvation and is, thus, justified in killing those he believes are already damned by God.

The story is told twice; first, from the perspective of the editor who gives his account of the facts as he understands them to be, and then in the words of Robert himself as the author of the original autobiographical manuscript, which is then found and published by the editor. Both novels employ metafictional devices such as footnotes, intertextuality, and self-reflexivity to highlight the constructedness of the narrative and to present it as a historically framed biographical account. They also both employ an editor-narrator who shapes the story and prompts the reader to consider the concept of narrative authority and to destabilise the notion of a singular truth. At the same time, both *Confessions* utilise metafiction to serve as a means of reinterpreting and critiquing historical narratives and knowledge, as Hogg's novel reflects the religious and moral concerns of its nineteenth-century Scottish setting.

However, *Confessions of the Fox* employs a much more synthetic and nuanced version of metafiction. The narrative structure of the book has three diegetic levels

that metaleptically transgress each other, thereby challenging the conventional way of submitting the framing narrative to the main one. The editor's narrative isn't merely a framing device for Sheppard's; it holds equal, if not greater, significance, subverting metafictionally traditional framing conventions. This reflects the novel's theme of subverting power dynamics, giving equal centrality to both transgender characters Dr Voth and Sheppard. Moreover, all narrative levels in Rosenberg's novel are interrelated and interdependent. Unlike the book *Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, where the two main levels remain structurally separate throughout the narrative, *Confessions of the Fox* challenges this conventional way of using metafiction through metaleptic transgressions. In addition to the structural independence in Hogg's novel, the two versions of the same event remain separate in their interpretative significance, too. In *Confessions of the Fox*, on the other hand, not only does the editor's narrative impact the interpretation of the biographical narrative (through the continuous commentary on the manuscript and the sustained sense of interaction between the two textual levels) but the editor's narrative is also inscribed in the main diegesis at the end of the book, rendering the editor a contributor in the collective authorship of the diary of a trace.

Lastly, Rosenberg's novel incorporates diverse elements of intertextuality and parody, drawing on historical texts and literary traditions to subvert conventional narratives and expose the inadequacies of the rigidity of genre and gendered axioms. The metafictional elements engage with a wide range of discourses, from colonialism and capitalism to queer theory and postcolonial studies, augmenting the novel's exploration of gender, race, and sexuality through a postmodern reimagining of historical events. While intertextuality is present in *Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, it

is less overt and draws mainly from religious texts, metafictionally focusing on psychological depth, moral introspection and the nature of evil. In the analysis that follows, I examine each aspect that makes Rosenberg's novel metafictionally original, focusing on the generating affinities between metafiction and transgender storytelling.

Returning to metafiction's function in unveiling the true identity of the manuscript, it enables the collapse of the illusion of the manuscript's biographical nature, after having constructed said illusion from the book's beginning. As Patricia Waugh argues in *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, "[m]etafictional novels tend to be constructed on the principle of a fundamental and sustained opposition: the construction of a fictional illusion (as in traditional realism) and the laying bare of that illusion. In other words, the lowest common denominator of metafiction is simultaneously to create a fiction and to make a statement about the creation of that fiction" (6). Metafiction's role is much more than just the crafting of a plot twist in the story and the unveiling of a hidden truth that shakes the plot; the tension between reality and fiction, familiarity and defamiliarisation is cultivated by and is equally found in the very form of the novel itself. The essence of metafiction's function lies in the cultivation of familiarity, which precedes the estranging deconstruction of the formal aspect that is "laid bare".

From the first page of the novel, the text is framed as a scholar's annotated eighteenth-century manuscript that reads almost like historical fiction. Rosenberg uses various metafictional elements to support this narrative effect—such as the editor's foreword, footnotes, annotations, and an index—drawing attention to the medium. The constant coexistence of the two diegetic narrative levels (located in the main body

of the text and the footnotes) is a continuous reminder of the anachronism between the historical and contemporary context of the narrative (located in the eighteenth century and the twenty-first century respectively)—a metafictional choice that once again emphasises the convention of the historically framed narrative that reads like an annotated manuscript. The following example, drawn from the novel's first pages after the editor's foreword, illustrates the contiguity between the two narrative levels: "Be a good girl.* Do what you're told. Behave. [...] And walk like a lady! Try not t' stomp like an animal!" (Rosenberg, *Confessions* 12) The asterisk included in the main body of the narrative, which comprises Sheppard's biography, points the reader at Dr Voth's footnotes, thereby creating a dialogue between the editor and the text. The footnotes on the same page read:

*Jack was assigned female at birth? This is a significant departure from the extant Sheppardiana. While nearly all the texts note him as "slight" or otherwise effeminate – his wiriness and compact size frequently cited as integral to his ability to escape tight spaces (e.g., the stage play *Little Jack Sheppard* [Yardley & Stephens, 1885], starring Nellie Farren as Jack) - *this I've never seen.* (Rosenberg, *Confessions* 12; italics in original)

The aforementioned metafictional convention, namely, the presentation of the novel as an annotated manuscript, is further instantiated by a metaleptic transgression when the two narrative levels merge into one textual body that constitutes one main singular narrative for four pages between chapters five and six. Metalepsis is realised through a dual transgressive merging of narrative levels when a) the editor's insights—that are otherwise spatially limited to the narrative level derived from the footnotes—

spread out to the main narrative's space which otherwise corresponds to Jack Sheppard's story, and when b) the editor's footnotes spread out to the main narrative's space, eliminating again the former primary diegetic level. I read these metaleptic instances as textually-realised moments of "trans touch across time"—a term used by Gil Mozer (2024). According to Mozer, "a transgender touch across time can be understood as an affective or temporal reassociation of a historical event or text—or of a culturally legible experience or event such as a birthday, baptism or naming ceremony, marriage, or parenthood. [...] [T]hese moments are used to signify shared affective experiences that are not rooted to periodization, thus touching *across time*" (194; italics in original).

While Mozer employs this concept to describe a form of trans temporality that captures resonant moments in trans lives—such as gender affirmation—that transcend linear periodisation and are relatable to audiences across different time periods, I extend his notion to analyse how the novel's two diegetic levels—which occupy distinct narrative ontologies (the primary diegetic level of the biographical narrative and the secondary level of the footnotes), as well as the two trans lives they represent (Sheppard's and Dr Voth's)—express a yearning to converge, make contact, and ultimately merge into a "trans touch" (194). In other words, I interpret these narrative instances as the materialisation of a desire for affective communion between trans individuals and their ancestors. Moreover, I argue that these instances of trans touch across time foreground the theme of alternative historicity, as well as the relational dynamic between the archival text and the trans body—a relationship I will explore in greater detail in the next section.

As far as the first metaleptic instance is concerned, it begins with an evocation to the narratee as the heading (“READER!”) and continues with “I have some urgent news to convey. This will be my last communication for a period of time” (258), unveiling the true identity of the manuscript and breaking the convention of linear storytelling through the specific format of a scholarly framed historical fiction. It is during this episode that the literary code of the novel is deconstructed so that it can, according to Waugh, “provide a statement about the dissociation between, on the one hand, the genuinely felt sense of crisis, alienation and oppression in contemporary society and, on the other, the continuance of traditional literary forms like realism which are no longer adequate vehicles for the mediation of this experience” (11).

After the intervening singular narrative of Dr Voth’s insights on the manuscript’s revealed identity, the second metaleptic instance takes place and the singular narrative is now solely constituted by Dr Voth’s footnotes. The switch between the two levels’ spatial dominance over the primary narrative is realised through an annotation on the last sentence of the editor’s insights, which connects the sentence that the annotation refers to with the footnote section of the page. Then, the editor’s commentary on his own insights results in the former’s spreading out of its initial positioning on the page and ends up comprising the primary narrative until the end of the chapter.

The revelation that the manuscript is neither original nor biographical and, thus, that “[t]here is no trans body, no body at all – no memoir, no confessions, no singular story of “you” or anyone – outside this broad and awful legacy” is fundamental, as it foregrounds Rosenberg’s opposition to “the ahistoricist tendency of

much fiction to imagine early modern London as a uniformly white city”, as the author states in his acknowledgements (Rosenberg, *Confessions* 315). This ideological resistance is rendered possible due to metafiction’s initial blurring of lines between reality and fiction until it ultimately lays reality bare by breaking fiction’s own frame and mechanisms through metalepsis. The main rhetorical value of the latter lies in the metonymic principle of transfer of sense, of assuming one thing for another—which reveals the constitutive role of narrative structures as they shape and reshape one another to mirror thematic transformations at the diegetic level. Narrative form thus becomes a site of tension, transition, and transformation, where structural and thematic shifts are intricately intertwined to articulate nuanced facets of transgender representation and intelligibility.

Metalepsis, in this way, creates a new primary narrative where two distinct diegetic levels merge into one, and it proposes a central narrating positioning of a marginalised voice in the most vital episode of the novel: the manuscript’s revealing identity and, by extension, history’s alternative existence. All three narrative ontological levels need to “interpenetrate”—to echo Waugh’s term—so that the “tension” between “the historical world and the alternative world” productively cultivates the reader’s problematisation of the concepts of reality, authority and oppression (38). What is more, beyond constructing an alternative historicity, the narrative also produces what Horvat (2025) describes as “an alternative, [...] radical, [...] trans archive”—a body of work that encompasses both private collections of works and personal accounts relating to transness, as well as the integration of such materials into larger institutional archives (2). Horvat argues that a trans archive is grounded in recognition and is driven by the desire of its users to engage with it in search of

affective trans “historical touches” across (2)—a dynamic I will return to later in my analysis.

The notion of alternative historicity is additionally augmented by the intersection of transgender and diasporic identity in the novel through Jack and Bess’s relationship. Being a woman of “lascar” descent from Srihatta and one of the only survivors of the Fen-Tigers, “a dwindling band of Freedom fighters” whose land has been severely exploited by surveyors, Bess Khan is brought to London as part of England’s East India Company (Rosenberg, *Confessions* 183). Her journey is filled with violence, labour, resistance and perseverance, while she navigates eighteenth-century London as a female person of colour. Bess’s tragic backstory is connected to Jack’s as they both share the experience of existing in a historically oppressed yet multi-crossing body. Jordy Rosenberg’s choice to foreground Sheppard’s non-cis-gendered identity along with Bess’s non-whiteness is of great importance; it safeguards the representation of marginalised identities which—in other forms of canonical historicity—has been utterly unquestioned, succumbing to a presumed and unchallenged cisness and whiteness.

Thus, the embodied contiguity between trans and diasporic identity serves to raise the fundamental questions of erasure and visibility throughout history: Whose voices are erased in the trajectory of history? Which bodies are given prominence? Through the employment of metafiction, *Confessions* manages to “contest the very possibility of our ever being able to know the ‘ultimate objects’ of the past [...] and so the only ‘genuine historicity’ becomes that which would openly acknowledge its own discursive, contingent identity” (Hutcheon 24). Hence, the metafictional formation of

transgender identity lies in the manuscript's authenticity and history being redefined, culminating in its unconventional identity as a collective locus of archived transgender affect.

Another rhetorical effect of metafiction, which connects history and gender in *Confessions*, is parody. In her book, Waugh draws an important connection between the parodic nature of metafiction and Roman Jakobson's theory on the poetic function of language, which highlights the relationship between literary genre and historical context. According to Jakobson, the poetic function of language manifests itself through substitution (vertical axis) and combination (horizontal axis), namely, through the projection of the paradigmatic/metaphorical dimension of language onto the syntagmatic/metonymic place: "This is precisely what parody does. Taking as its starting point a previous work or genre, it inserts a metaphoric version of this into the ongoing (metonymic) literary tradition" (Waugh 69). In *Confessions of the Fox*, this parodic effect is achieved through the playfulness of gender. Although the novel does not parody cisness, in the sense that it does not establish imitation for the effect of comedy, it metafictionally subverts the structures of authority that are entailed in cisgender identity by "exaggerating" on the basis of sex and gender assignment.

Rosenberg's choice to assign a different sex to the notorious thief of eighteenth-century England, whose legacy has inspired a plethora of artistic works and references in various media—the most well-known being John Gay's 1728 *The Beggar's Opera*—provides an alternative version of history that challenges the normative and unquestionable assumptions of the time period. Postmodernism serves as the most pertinent frame for such an objective, situating "institutions [...] under

scrutiny”, and even history itself, since “[m]ake-believe or illusionist conventions of art are often bared in order to challenge the institutions in which they find a home - and a meaning” (Huncheon 9-10). The central position of a trans character, namely, one who is inspired directly by a cisgender historical figure, serves to additionally highlight the historical erasure of queer individuals in history and literature. Sheppard’s trans identity subversively and alternatively allows for the exploration of intersecting systems of oppression, including class, race, gender and sexuality, instantiating metafiction’s principle to “explore the notion of ‘alternative worlds’ by accepting and flaunting the creation/description paradox, and thus expose how the construction of contexts is also the construction of different universes of discourse” (Waugh 90).

The rhetorical effect of metafiction and gender contiguity is significant here, as it is not solely the result of either metafiction or the protagonist's gender that enables this alternative historical perspective, but on account of metafiction’s *and* gender’s interplay. In other words, the narrative act of drawing attention to itself is manifested through a trans narrator, the primary narrative figure who has control over the conveying of the story. The positioning of a trans narrator in such an agency of authority while also denouncing the normative authoritative agencies that have historically erased a multitude of marginalised voices, underlines Rosenberg’s purpose further: to queer and resist canonical historicity by offering an alternative (hi)story. And by doing so, Rosenberg also “calls for a collective rejection of the fantasy of a knowable singular historical transgender subject” (Mozer 196) and highlights a shared trans lineage. Additionally, it is through the playfulness and subversiveness of gender that genre is also parodied. Similar to the manuscript, which mischievously resists categorisation and rigid identification, the novel defies conventional generic

boundaries by blending elements of historical fiction, fantasy, romance, and satire, creating a narrative that challenges readers' expectations and perceptions of what constitutes memoir, historical documentation and authentic authorship.

Like the confrontation of the gender binary, *Confessions* parodically highlights the constructed nature of genre, echoing Hutcheon's assertion regarding the artificiality of historical constructs. Hutcheon contends that "the orders we create are just that: human constructs, not natural or given entities" (41-42), emphasising the fluidity and human-made essence of these classifications. Metafiction is the primary enabler for that, but it is due to the trans/queer manifestation of the narrative technique and the central positioning of the trans identity that the aforementioned effects are evoked; it is due to the marginal, the "ex-centric", the one coming from a "decentered perspective", namely, the trans narrator, that the normative historicity is being challenged and rethought (Hutcheon 12). Lastly, the fact that Jordy Rosenberg, being transgender himself, is the author of such a novel, doubles the aforementioned rhetorical effects by underlining the intentionality and self-reflexivity of the communicative act that the text comprises.

Returning to the metaleptic principle of transferring of sense which informs the unique rhetoricity of the narrative technique, it can be further realised and comprehended if we approach the metaleptic collapse of narrative levels as an instance of signification through the theory of the sign as introduced by Charles Sanders Peirce. According to Albert Atkin, "Peirce believes the sign/interpretant relation to be one of determination: the sign determines an interpretant. Further, this determination is not determination in any causal sense, rather, the sign determines an

interpretant by using certain features of the way the sign signifies its object to generate and shape our understanding. So, the way that smoke generates or determines an interpretant sign of its object, fire, is by focusing our attention upon the physical connection between smoke and fire”.⁴⁹ The foundational concept in Peirce’s theory lies in the fact that meaning is not fixed, but rather generated. Through the interaction of these three components (sign, object and interpretant), the interpreter undergoes a cognitive process that enables him to have a mental understanding or concept which is evoked when they encounter a sign.

Following Peirce’s theory, the analogy between the three components of signification and the story’s elements would be the following: the sign is the historical framing of the manuscript, the object is the manuscript per se, and the interpretant is the reading of the manuscript as authentic, biographical and of singular authorship. Dr Voth, the interpreter, is progressively convinced that the various deictics that support the historical nature of the manuscript—such as the “lionizing of Jack’s prowess” (Rosenberg 5), the subtle deviation in terms of tone and expression from dominant reference materials (10, 16, 21), and the profound reference to Sheppard’s assigned sex (12, 16) and Bess’s identification as “Iascar” (27)—potentially point to the document’s “most or [...] least authentic Sheppard document in existence” (27). Ultimately, he inevitably considers the manuscript to be authentic, as this belief (interpretant) is determined by the document’s historical features (sign) through which the manuscript (object) is signified.

⁴⁹ Albert Atkin, “Peirce’s Theory of Signs”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

This account of interpretation is significant for the story, as the “real” interpretant (the manuscript’s identity as an “activist archive” (Horvat 2) and a “diary of a trace” of collective authorship) is only realised at the point of metaleptic collapse (Rosenberg, *Confessions* 260).

Well, Reader, I’ve come to the inescapable conclusion that the confessions of Jack Sheppard contain, as they say, *multitudes*. Put more simply, they are not a singular memoir. They are something else. [...] I must confess that I believe my own attachment to the text clouded my ability to recognize the glaring obviousness of this collective authorship earlier. [...] Plitho-hypomnesis is the only explanation for the many generic irregularities and impossible references that populate this text. A diary of a trace. (259-260; italics in original)

The “laying bare” of metafiction’s formal decoding is simultaneously instantiated by and leads to the metaleptic moment of the merging of realities and fictions, with the rhetorical purpose of cultivating ideological resistance against ahistoricism. In other words, Dr Voth’s inability to promptly and accurately “translate” the sign into the correct interpretant impedes its successful interpretation. Even though the editor had been generating a “correct” meaning from the sign and the object, in the sense that the evocation of the initial interpretant was based on reasonable criteria, he interpreted those same features in a manner that rendered the whole instance of signification completely different, ultimately foregrounding both the resistance between fiction and reality, and also their merging. This is the narrative choice which ultimately allows for the metaleptic collapse of narrative levels and the synecdochic utilisation of the trans body as a symbol for all marginalised corpora.

Overall, metalepsis' principle to "assume one thing for another"⁵⁰ becomes intelligible here as a semiotic system of relations where representation and reality are at the same time conflated and interilluminated.

Furthermore, the subversion of the dominant dynamic between authoritative and suppressed voices is also realised by the challenging of normative applications of classical narratology, namely, the concept of narrative levels. According to Gérard Genette, metafiction heavily depends on the logically and explicitly hierarchised narrative levels: "*any event a narrative recounts is at a diegetic level immediately higher than the level at which the narrating act producing this narrative is placed*" (228; italics in original). This hierarchy derives from the representational perception of language, namely, its semantic relation to real-life experience. According to the Genettian logic, metafiction is established when there is a clear differentiation between those levels of representation, and more so when there is a narrative act that is carried out at a first level (the one supposedly in closer proximity to the lived experience), which is called extradiegetic and entails the events of the enclosed story (second/diegetic level).

Confessions of the Fox complicates this hierarchical logic through metalepsis. Although the editor's forward establishes the extradiegetic level clearly and introduces the reader to the metafictional convention of the text, the existence of two diegetic levels that expand in a parallel manner throughout the narrative blurs the ontological boundaries between what remains fiction and what remains reality in representational terms. This metaleptic cohabitation between two distinct narrative levels serves to

⁵⁰ John Pier, "Metalepsis", *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, Paragraph 7.

rhetorically cultivate an “illusion of contemporaneousness between the time of the telling and the time of the told”,⁵¹ namely, between narrating and narrated.

The “time of telling”/narrating corresponds to the second diegetic level, the footnotes, since the way that they are written (drawing attention to the editor’s “real-time” emotions and reactions to the text as he forms his notes) allows for the illusion that they are constructed at the same time as the editor’s engagement with the primary narrative, namely, Sheppard’s biography. If the extradiegetic level with Dr Voth, who retrospectively presents the manuscript to the narratee, is in closer proximity to reality (according to the Genettian theory), then where does the diegetic level with Dr Voth, who annotates the manuscript “in real time” to the manuscript’s unfolding, stand in relation to fiction? Is it part of the story or part of the frame that conceptualises the story?

According to Florian Zitzelsberger’s article “On The Queer Rhetoric of Metalepsis” (2019), metafiction is an antimimetic praxis that is considered unnatural due to its subversive effects in merging fiction with reality: “Since most of narrative fiction is of mimetic nature, however, the unnaturalness implied in metalepsis ‘urges us to create new mental models through blends [...] because storyworlds that contain impossibilities cannot be reconstructed on the basis of real-world parameters only” (131). The collapse of the representational hierarchy in *Confessions* that forces a solid distinction between levels (extradiegetic-diegetic), narrative agencies (narrator-character) and representational frames (reality-fiction), is fulfilled through the metaleptic intersection of all three distinct narratives, which fuzzes the lines between

⁵¹ John Pier, “Metalepsis”, *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, Paragraph 5.

historical fact, personal story and academic criticism, and yet again foregrounds an understanding of narrative form as a locus of dialogic relationships between structural and thematic transformations. The hierarchy in the levels is defied due to the resistance towards what Zitzelsberger calls “heteroreferential signifiers” (133). The concept of ontologically distinct narrative levels fails in Rosenberg’s novel, since each level does not acquire its identity by hetero-relating (relating to others, namely, the narrating act and/or other levels) as the Genettian theory supports, but becomes “meaningful in and by itself” (Zitzelsberger 133).

Following that, the narrative level deriving from the footnotes signifies an important departure from traditional narrative structures, in that not only does it interact with the narrative stemming from eighteenth-century England through academic commentary, but it also provides an additional layer of narrative that includes personal anecdotes, alternative theories and self-commentary. A part of normative British colonial eighteenth-century history becomes contingent on a marginalised individual’s perception and approach, subverting the dominant dynamic between authoritative and suppressed voices. Thus, the author’s denouncement of the aforesaid oppressive discourse is narratively manifested through the complexity and intersection of the narrative levels “by establishing connections between that which is usually considered to be mutually exclusive and by making the unnatural the primary narrative strategy that generates meaning” (Zitzelsberger 136).

Text as Body and Body as Text

The metafictional nature of *Confessions* exhibits an additional generative affinity with transgender identity by facilitating an analogy between the textual and

somatic body, namely, the manuscript and the trans body. As Ivo Zender illustrates in his “Desire for Trans Ancestors: An Affective Reading of *Confessions of the Fox*” (2023), “the trans body appears in its textuality” and is approached through “the theme of encountering something mysterious” (51). Similar to the manuscript, which defies normative generic categorisations and comprehensible identity, the transgender body is often approached through the same process of others questioning its “authenticity (is this real?), intelligibility (how do I culturally understand and classify this?) and the ethics of encounter (how do I approach this?)” (Zender 51).

The relationality between text and trans body is further amplified in *Confessions* through the employment of language, namely, the textual/verbal representation of trans corporeality. This becomes particularly prevalent in the novel’s erotic scenes when, for instance, Bess describes Jack’s body by reclaiming certain terms whose negative connotation is linked with abnormality, such as “Daemon. Sphinx. Hybrid. Scitha, man-horse, deep-water Kraken, Monster-flower” (Rosenberg, *Confessions* 109). The author’s choice to reclaim harmful and fetishising speech and render it gender-affirming and erotic functions as a resistance against the unequal power dynamics arising from the linguistic construction of identity and underlines metafiction’s effect of disrupting and subverting the idea of normativity. But such employment of erotic language in the novel is not merely gender-affirming but also gender-giving.

As Cassius Adair and Aren Aizura (2022) observe, the erotic can serve as “a site of identity formation” (47), and more specifically, “a site of producing trans identity” (46), particularly in sexual encounters between trans men and cis femmes. In such

moments, the femme partner engages in what Jane Ward (2010) terms “gender labor” (237)—the act of “witnessing, nurturing, validating, fulfilling, [and] authenticating” (240) her partner’s trans body. This “gender labor” constitutes a form of co-creating gender through erotic intimacy (Ward 237). In *Confessions of the Fox*, this dynamic is made possible through Rosenberg’s deployment of reclaimed fetishising and historically anti-trans language during intimate scenes, wherein Bess affirms Jack’s “trans becoming” through erotic discourse (Adair and Aizura 51).

In addition, although it is rich in its description of longing, lust and ecstasy—rendering the novel a deeply sensual narrative—one of the most vital aspects of the narrative representation of the trans erotic is the dislodging of any sense of voyeurism and tokenism of both the female and the transgender body. The erotic language maintains a balance of generosity and crypticness, due to its highly sensorial and figurative qualities which render it non-exposing and non-voyeuristic:

He kiss’d her breasts - her mouth - her Neck – petted between her legs, where she puls’d against his Fingertips. [...] But he loved the Scent, the taste most of all. Sweet marshmallow and warm breath; saltwater threaded with Violet. All these bouquets – and more – and more. He toyed with her between her thighs until she shiver’d magnificently in his arms. (Rosenberg, *Confessions* 92-93)

She brought her hand down between them and drew her fingers across the front of it, tracing his outline with a Fingertip. The thing between Jack’s legs swelled bigger. “Cinamoli.” [...] The heat of her surrounded his Swollenness. (109-110)

Consequently, the transgender body in the novel is neither “othered” nor medicalised. Rather, it is inscribed by a liberating non-normativity which resists any binary-bound categorisation.

The manuscript (as well as Dr Voth’s narrative) also exemplifies the ethics of visibility, prioritising the agency of its subjects over their own corporeality rather than merely satisfying readers’ desires. This becomes particularly evident when contemplating the title of Rosenberg’s novel; the word “confessions” conveys a nuanced meaning, alluding not merely to the disclosure of unfiltered or invasive information, but to the consensual and intentional sharing of personal details with a specific audience. “It is almost certainly the case that if there were a hack job this section would include a voyeuristic depiction of Jack’s genitalia”, the editor notes in the manuscript’s footnotes (109). “I consider this elegant declining-to-describe to be strong evidence of the document’s authenticity”, he continues (109). “Of course, personally, I’m more than happy to go on at length about my prodigious genitalia. But there’s a difference between a confession one wants to give, and one that is taken” (109). As Chiara Pellegrini notes in her 2022 article “Declining to Describe: Intersex Narrators and Textual Visibility”, Dr Voth “draws attention to the difference between showing/telling that comes from an I who has agency and control over what is revealed, and one for which this is not the case” (52).

Therefore, just as Dr Voth safeguards the textual body of the manuscript from being leaked and falling into the wrong hands, which ultimately leads to his departure from the University, the manuscript (and the collective authorship behind it) protects Jack Sheppard's corporeal body; it avoids exploiting his naked image, instead

portraying his lust and eroticism alongside Bess with respectful and artistic figurative language. This parallelism exemplifies the analogy between body and text by bringing together the somatic and the discursive under the lens of the ethical. Simultaneously, the body stands as text and the text as body by virtue of their mutual, embodied variance. Just like the sex/gender-variant subject, as represented by Jack and Dr Voth, whose embodiment is characterised by mixed gender and sex characteristics, the manuscript similarly embodies a non-monolithic identity but presents *genre*-variations by embodying elements of historical documentation, memoir, (auto)biography and multiple authorship. All these generic categories are discursively embodied in the text as visible traces, resulting in the formation of a *genre*-variant body. And similar to the trans and sex/gender-variant body, the manuscript does not belong to a singular category nor can become conventionally intelligible, thereby comprising a non-conforming discursive embodiment.

Moreover, an important scene in the novel which foregrounds the aforesaid contiguity between the somatic and discursive is Jack's top surgery, which is performed by Bess. The symbolism of the subject's lover being the impetus for his gender affirmation is powerful, as it demonstrates the cathartic effect of the transitioning individual being fully perceived—both figuratively and literally—by his lover during all stages of his (medical) transition: “For Bess had freed him of a chest-burden so great he hadn't even known, until it had been removed, what weight he had carried. [...] Bess had closed the chasm, sutured it when she sutured Jack's chest” (151). This scene materialises Ward's concept of “gender labor” (237) as the femme partner assumes a catalytic role in her partner's “trans becoming” (Adair and Aizura 51), rendered in explicitly somatic and literal terms.

The narrator's description of Jack's feelings of alleviating his gender dysphoria after his gender-affirmation surgery resembles the emotive experience of returning home. In the words of Sara Ahmed, drawn from her book *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (2000):

The lived experience of being-at-home hence involves the enveloping of subjects in a space which is not simply outside of them: being at home suggests that the subject and space leak into each other, *inhabit each other*. We can think of the lived experience of being-at-home in terms of inhabiting a second skin, a skin which does not simply contain the homely subject, but which allows the subject to be touched and touch the world that is neither simply in the home or away from home. (89; italics in original)

Ahmed's reference to both inhabiting and touching one another echoes the novel's concept of love's inscription on the body and the longing for embodiment in the presence of a loved one, thereby connecting the textual with the bodily. Thus, "home" acquires a dual meaning for Jack: to be with Bess and to be in his affirmed body.

The novel's parallel relationship between the textual and the bodily is further amplified by the narrative category of the narratee/the "reader"—a textual entity which is embodied by the actual reader (a corporeal entity) on account of desire and affectivity. To illustrate this argument, I draw again from Zender who thoroughly analyses the ramifications of pursuing an affective reading of Rosenberg's novel and designates the connection between transgender narrative and attentive readership. Even though the notion of the narratee pertains exclusively to the level of the narrative and is unrelated to the actual reader, *Confessions of the Fox* complicates this rigid

categorisation through the cultivation of a fictional receiver of the manuscript who resembles the actual, real-life receiver of the novel as they (narratee and reader) both belong to the same “exclusive” community of reading “Confessions”.

As Zender posits, the collective identity of the narratee, “[t]he *us*[,] knows more than the *they*”, the outsiders of the community, since “the *us* is equipped with a queer literacy through the shared experience of marginalisation that allows the collective narratee to decode the text and thereby enjoy it” (60; italics in original). As the narratee is attributed with these characteristics, the reader is “drawn in through affection”, rendering the reader not only “addressed and affected, but even appropriated” (Zender 60), and by extension rendering them an embodiment of the textual entity that they are affectively read through/as. As Zender highlights, by leaning in and “lustful[ly] submi[tting] to the text”, the reader “is made a subversive and queer subject” (60). Consequently, the connection between the textual narrative and the physical body is enriched as the reader embodies the narratee of the manuscript through an affective engagement with the text.

Lastly, *Confessions of the Fox’s* conclusion sheds light on the novel’s concept of love’s inscription on the body one final time by virtue of metalepsis, when Dr Voth adds a final sentence (“And go with her.*†”) to the manuscript, thereby becoming a part of its collective authorship and affective historicity (Rosenberg, *Confessions* 315). By doing so, as Horvat observes, the line between author and archivist becomes blurred, challenging a key principle of traditional archivism—the idea that the archive should remain pure and untouched (9). Voth inscribes himself in the document, echoing the novel’s epigraph “*Love’s mysteries in souls do grow, but yet the body is his*

book” (Rosenberg, *Confessions* vii; italics in original) and transmuting his embodied experience of having been “taught [...] the second history of [his] body” by his former partner into a textual body. This temporal convergence between the trans collective past (embodied in and by the text’s collective authorship) and the trans individual present (embodied by Dr Voth) can be understood as another affective “touching” across time—to describe how “time takes the form of a viscous element through which disparate narratives can touch and affect each other” (Mozer 196). By foregrounding the constructedness of the manuscript (the textual body) as a product of trans collective effort and solidarity, the narrative simultaneously draws attention to the constructedness of the trans body (the somatic body) as a site of re-signification as made possible through its affective engagement with its archival ancestors.

Similar to the manuscript, which has been read and inscribed with diverse renditions of alternative (hi)stories by a collective of like-minded individuals potentially bound by shared experiences of exclusion and marginalisation, seeking to decolonise specific texts while preserving, and simultaneously displaying, solidarity and affection for their historical community, Dr Voth has been “read”, comprehended, marked, and unmarked anew through the act of love’s inscription on the body, through sexual and emotive intimacy. Just like Jack Sheppard, whose transness is only fully realised as the embodiment of his desire for Bess, of his longing to “*have a Body* in her presence” (Rosenberg, *Confessions* 50; italics in original) by virtue of her perception of him as his true self, Dr Voth’s contribution to the manuscript signifies how affection is imprinted on the body and can trace a history. It “inscribes the body” (Rosenberg, *Confessions* xii) not by assigning it a rigid identity, but by liberating it “from every pre-existing bond, body, name [it] ever had” (315). It bridges the “Chasm[s]” of one’s past,

by forming a sense of *Togetherness* and, ultimately, a sense of sociopolitical solidarity and belonging. (144, 111; italics in original) Thereby, through this last narrative instance of metaleptic transgression between the two diegetic levels, the somatic and textual body become one by virtue of their mutual constructedness.

Metafiction and Transness

Up to this point, I have illustrated the ways that metafiction can bear significantly upon trans storytelling in foregrounding the complexity of transgender identity by virtue of metafiction's own complex rhetorical vehicles and effects. The aforesaid nexus between the two phenomena, metafictionality and transness, can be further approached through the exploration of their ontological affinity as concepts, especially from the standpoint of their perception and reception.

To begin with, both notions question ontological boundaries of identity and self-identification through a self-reflexive process. According to rhetorical narratology and specifically Richard Walsh's approach to narratives, fictionality is not "a quality of the object of representation, but of the real-world communicative act" and is, by extension, culturally and contextually determined as a "communicative resource rather than a representational matter of truth or ontology" ("The Rhetoric of Metafiction" 188). Fictionality is always a rhetorical act and not contingent upon a singular or factual axiom. Walsh argues that "by assuming an utterance's fictionality, we look to understand it in terms that are dissociated from its directly informative status" and concludes with "[f]ictionality, understood in rhetorical terms, is constitutionally a form of self-consciousness; seen in this light, metafiction is not the

disruption of fiction, but the redoubling of fiction's own foundational move" ("The Rhetoric of Metafiction" 188).

As Joshua Bastian Cole-Cruz observes in "You Can't Go Home Again: Remakes as Trans Method" (2024), transgender individuals often study how cisgender people perform gender in order to adopt certain traits—mannerisms, expressions, and behaviors—framing this act of mimicking as a "method of desire" and a "distinctly reflective" practice that facilitates gender reproduction (154). In a parallel move, metafiction constructs a new narrative form from the familiar through self-conscious revision, deploying strategies of self-referentiality and self-reflexivity. In a similar way, "trans [people] also look at the familiar, the 'classic,' the readable form, and then [they] re-create it with self-aware revisions" (Cole-Cruz 161).

As far as self-referentiality is concerned, transness is both individually and contextually determined. It exists in a spectrum and its gender expression is contingent upon the individual's self-perception. Its expression can also be context-aware and/or specific, depending again on the trans individual's identity. Another way that context is related to and can bear upon the trans identity is through context cues—hints and clues within a communicative context that help the receiver of the communicative act decipher certain communicative codes and behaviourally adapt. Such context cues allow trans individuals to be perceived as their self by the account of semantics. Although this does not apply to every trans person, context cues can enhance communication with others, rendering context an ally to self-perception and self-referentiality.

Moreover, both metafiction and transness explore the possibilities and limitations of fiction and gender, respectively. I have discussed earlier in this article metafiction's undermining of formal classification, generic singularity, and literal view of language; instead, metafiction enhances narrative fluidity, amplifies the merging of antithetical genres, and playfully creates narrative illusions. Similarly, trans identity acknowledges the multiplicity of gender and different ways of being and explores self-expression as non-categorisable by the gender binary. The trans body often parallels the effect of metafiction in challenging perceptions of "what lies underneath"; readers grappling with metaleptic digressions in metafictional texts endeavour to discern "what lies underneath" the narrative structure, such as the "illusion" presented by an extradiegetic unreliable narrator. Likewise, cisgender individuals often confront the challenge of categorising trans individuals within binary gender constructs, unable to ascertain the full extent of their gender identity because they can't determine "what's underneath", which stems from their "possessive anxiety over what counts as 'the real thing', the original [...] body" (Cole-Cruz 158).

Furthermore, metafiction and transness reject the idea of a singular and authoritative narrative. Transgender identity inherently subverts dominant views, conventions and axioms regarding gendered embodiment and expression, while metafiction defies authoritative narrative structures and limitations. To come back to Rosenberg's novel, the metafictional nature of *Confessions of the Fox* adds greatly to the aforementioned idea of liberation from one's embodied self. This narrative frame of *meta* ("after")—of "going beyond"—serves as the narrative manifestation of the emotive experience of letting go—of departing from the idea of the manuscript's authorial singularity, as well as of the idea of singularity regarding the identity of the

body in the novel. Similarly, transgender identity holds the same hermeneutical autonomy on account of the ontology of “going across” (“trans”), of “crossing sides” and reclaiming the hermeneutical autotelia of the self through self-reference, becoming what Cole-Cruz calls “its own category of authorship” (158).

Conclusions

In light of the utilisation of a contextual narratological approach that prioritises gender-conscious interpretations through formal investigations, in this chapter of my thesis, I have sought to underscore the convergence of narrative form and narrated content, elucidating the interplay between metafictionality and trans storytelling. I have argued that the generative affinities between metafiction and transgender identity in *Confessions of the Fox* lie in the novel’s metafictional originality and postmodern re-negotiation of key normative notions, such as constructedness, authenticity, authorship, historicity and fictionality. Self-reflexivity comprises the main medium for the interrogation of the aforementioned categories, being at the heart of the problematisation of concepts like identity, history, language and other institutionalised phenomena. Through this process of deconstructing conventional understandings to facilitate the acquisition of new insights, I have illustrated the ways that the employment of historiographic metafiction in Rosenberg’s novel works self-consciously to expose the inadequacies of the rigidity of genre (like realism and memoir) and gendered axioms (like gender binary and sexuality).

Overall, analysing narrative form as a site of structural and thematic transformations—through the intersection of narratology and transgender studies—offers an effective way to articulate the distinctive nuances of transgender identity and

storytelling in post-modern contexts. A contextually grounded narratological approach to trans narratives, especially through the lens of metafiction, compellingly reveals the generative role of gender as a vital and productive category in both the construction and interpretation of narrative. Conclusively, proving that—in the words of Waugh— “[f]rames are set up only to be continually broken [and] [c]ontexts are ostentatiously constructed only to be subsequently deconstructed”, the metafictional ingenuity in *Confessions of the Fox* and its resonance with transgender themes allow for a compellingly unconventional interrogation of self-reference through the rhetoric of fictionality (101).

Conclusions

[N]arratology gives us an insight into the principles governing systems of signs and signifying practices as well as our interpretation of them. To study the nature of all and only possible narratives, to account for their form and functioning, to examine how and why it is that we can construct them [...] is to study one of the fundamental ways - and a singularly human one at that - in which we make sense. Ultimately, narratology can help us understand what human beings are. (Prince, *Narratology* 164)

When I attended my first postgraduate conference as a master's student some years ago, I presented an early and (very) formative version of what would eventually become my current doctoral project—yet it already aimed toward the same goal: foregrounding the mutually illuminating relationship between narratology and queer theory. After my presentation, the panel's coordinator (who was also a lecturer) asked me the following question: *How do you reconcile using such a radical perspective as queer or gender theory with a conservative and outdated field like narratology?* As one might imagine, the question didn't feel entirely objective, but it proved to be immensely formative for my future identity as a researcher. It is in response to that very assumption—one I came to realise over the years is shared by many—that narratology and queer studies are irreconcilable fields, and that one is inherently more "important" than the other (which is thought for either field, depending on which "side" the person voicing this is)—that this doctoral thesis was ultimately conceived.

However, there are no true “sides” here, as there is no compelling reason why narratology and queer or gender studies cannot be brought into productive dialogue, particularly when studying narrative form in modern and post-modern gender-conscious novels. As noted in the introduction, narrative form has long carried a reputation for being either indifferent or even restrictive toward gendered and queer significations. At the same time, it has often been treated as more significant than narrated content, and indeed, was historically prioritised within narrative theory, particularly up until the 1970s. Until only a few decades ago, the very notion of a contextual narratology, as it sought to remain rooted in structuralist principles while also opening itself up to interdisciplinary exchange, would have been viewed with significant scepticism. Yet in most postclassical forms of narratology—such as feminist, queer, and more recently, corporeal narratology—gender has come to play a central role in interpretation, constituting a key focal point of analysis and meaning-making.

What still remains to be fully explored is what Prince once challenged narratologists to undertake: to evaluate gender in terms of its productivity as a formal element within narrative structure—a research hypothesis that forms a central objective of this thesis. By “productivity”, Prince refers to gender’s potential “importance in ‘adequate’ accounts of narrative possibilities as well as [...] its capacity to raise new and narratively pertinent problems (on plot structure, say, on narrative domains and energetics, on narrative speed and frequency)” (“Narratology, Narratological Criticism and Gender” 162). Through my research, I respond affirmatively to Prince’s inquiry. When gender is approached not merely as a contextual element but as a narrative component with intratextual functions—vis-à-vis other formal elements such as temporality, perspective, focalisation, narrative

space, characterisation, and metafiction—it opens up new possibilities for both formalist narrative analysis and interpretive inquiry.

For instance, a narratological consideration of gender—through Orlando’s sex transformation, Essun’s identity as a Black mother, Cal/lie’s intersexuality, Kimiâ’s suppressed bisexuality as a migrant, Jess’s gender-non-conformity, and Jack Sheppard’s transness, in relation to the narrative’s shifting modes of temporality, perspective, focalisation, narrative space, characterisation, and metafiction, respectively—illuminates the deeper connection between narrative form and the narrated story. Even though one could still examine—through various critical frameworks—the thematic interplay between panoramic perception of gender and panoramic view of temporality, post-slavery subjectivity and diegetic split between the narratee and the protagonist, intersexuality and narrative consciousness, exile identity and thematisation of space, liminal embodiment and generic ambivalence, transness and self-writing through fiction, it is precisely the sustained engagement with gender in dialogue with narrative structure (through a contextual narratological standpoint) that most effectively reveals the interdependence of form and content.

In *Middlesex*, for instance, the analysis of gender—through intersex intelligibility—in relation to focalisation, via narrative impossibility, emerges through a contextually grounded formalism. In *Confessions of the Fox*, gender—via an alternative trans historicity—interacts with metafiction through the self-reflexive trans diegesis to produce a similar dynamic. This also holds true for *Stone Butch Blues*, where gender—articulated through “trans authenticity” (Rosenberg, “Afterword” 274)—intersects with characterisation via the novel’s discursively unintelligible body. In

Orlando, gender—manifested as a sexed yet genderless embodiment—corresponds with temporality—through a queer temporal continuum. In *Disoriental*, gender—figured as both self-exile and homeland—engages with narrative space through the spatialisation of sexuality. And in *The Fifth Season*, gender—through the lens of Black motherhood—shapes and is shaped by perspective, specifically through a reconceptualised “maternal” narration. In this sense, the productivity of gender in narrative processing lies not merely in its role as a thematic concern, but in its function as a formal component within the novel’s narrative infrastructure, offering new possibilities for nuanced interpretations of queer and gender-conscious texts.

In addition, the “new and narratively pertinent problems” that such an approach raises (Prince, “Narratology, Narratological Criticism and Gender” 162) concern the limitations of classical narratology that a contextually grounded, narratological reading of queer narratives brings to light. For example, in *Orlando*, Genette’s classical temporal categories of duration and ellipsis are fundamentally destabilised, as their function is redefined through the narrative’s queerness (both in terms of gender and temporality). Rather than operating as universally applicable narrative devices, as posited by classical narratology, these temporal structures become an autonomous site for the spatiotemporal reimagining of the protagonist’s embodied queer temporality.

Highlighting these limitations is not intended to discredit the undeniable contributions of classical narratology to narrative studies or its relevance to gender-conscious interpretations. Rather, it serves to underscore the need for a more expansive narratological framework—one better equipped to engage with queer and

gender-related narratives. Such narratives frequently challenge and reconfigure traditional narrative categories, making it essential to examine these moments of queerness and ask: how are normative theoretical classifications disrupted, and—perhaps more crucially—with what (narrative and interpretative) consequences?

In this doctoral project, I have argued that transformation serves as a crucial lens for examining the relationship between narrative form and content. From Todorov's structuralist framework to contemporary queer narrative theory's reconceptualisation of transformation as both a marker of identity and a formalist strategy, this concept has quietly underpinned much of narrative theory. Yet, despite its significance, transformation remains a largely underexamined framework in narrative analysis. In this thesis, I have sought to foreground its importance—not merely as a recurring theme in my primary texts, but more crucially as a methodological axis through which the interplay between narrative form and content can be understood. Narrative structures do not operate in isolation; rather, they mutually shape one another, creating a web of interdependent relationships that both trace and give rise to thematic significations.

This is a methodological framework that I hope to see more narratologists and theorists of narrative utilise in the future, specifically in the analysis of narratives that tell a story about identities in transit. As queer narrative theory has evidently shown, queerness and identity formation are concepts not only associated with but also materialised as changing forms, “provid[ing] formerly unimaginable possibilities for what we could be or become, but always in our own version” (Fawaz 364). The same way that transformation is inherent in narrative form, “rooted in our perception of

[the] unities” that narratives are (Schärfe 2), transformation is equally inherent in identities, as it describes “how individuals meaningfully mold and remold their sense of self over time” (Fawaz 11). Consequently, my argument for analysing narrative form proposes a mode of formalism grounded in narratological methodology—concerned with the study of narrative structures—while also drawing on theoretical frameworks from gender and queer studies to foreground gender- and queer-conscious significations and to emphasise the ways in which queerness can be narratively articulated. This integrative approach is made possible through contextual narratology, an expansive and prominent field of postclassical narratology that is capable of addressing the complexities of both narrative structure and the representation of queer identities.

Moreover, in terms of future theorising within contextual narratology, one crucial area yet to be explored in greater depth is what Lanser proposed in 2024 in the pursuit of a comprehensive trans narratology: the study of the various structural dimensions of trans narratives and the diverse ways in which trans characters are represented within spatiotemporal, generic, and plot-related frameworks, among others. Such an approach would not only reinforce the connection between narratological methodology and gender or queer studies, but also further underscore the importance of studying gender in relation to narrative infrastructure. Viewed through this lens, the principle of transformation could be specifically reframed in terms of transition, offering a valuable tool for analysing the narrative processing of transgender stories.

Narratology is historically known for its rigid categorisations and schemas, designed to account for all and only narratives. Yet, simultaneously, it has succeeded in capturing the breadth of the human experience conveyed through stories, thanks to its highly analytical toolkit. Although these two facets of the discipline may seem irreconcilable, it is through the principle of transformation that human identity can really be captured; the broader the narratological perspective on these transformations, the more effectively narratology can respond to the need to unveil and elucidate them. One avenue for pursuing this goal involves examining gender as a pertinent and fruitful focal point within narratological inquiry. When undertaken intratextually, namely, with a focus on its dialogic interplay with the narrative's manifold structures, such an approach has the potential to shed light on theorists' conceptualisations of narrative identities, while also remaining true to narratology's structuralist roots. Narrating is always a process in transformation, akin to the protagonists of the stories it sometimes narrates; it is only through embracing these transformations, examining their synthetic connections and attempting to locate their mutual reflectiveness and illumination, that we are able to read form in content and content in form.

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