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“A NARRATIVE IS A LIVING BODY”: TRANS-RELATIONS IN CONTEMPORARY  
TRANSMASCULINE FICTION

A Thesis Presented

By

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## Abstract

This thesis explores how recent novels are able to expand representations of transgender experiences and promote identification with these characters and their experiences, even if the reader is not trans themselves. It begins by delving into a brief history of transgender narrative and the problems associated with these narratives having been primarily in the form of memoir. It then examines how Rose Tremain's *Sacred Country*, despite being one of the first instances of a fictional narrative focused on a transgender man, reflects similarly problematic narrative characteristics to those found in memoir. Proposing a concept of trans-relational reading, which promotes identifications with the characters through their own felt embodiment, this project will look closely at four recent novels that center characters who are trans men.

The focus is first on novels that are based on narratives already in the historical or literary archive. Austin Chant's *Peter Darling* reimagines a transgender Peter Pan's return to Neverland as a young adult and follows Peter as he navigates his relationship to his body and his understanding of masculinity. Jordy Rosenberg's *Confessions of the Fox* presents Jack Sheppard, a historical thief and jailbreaker in 18<sup>th</sup> century London, as a trans man who also must grapple with his physical body, his transness, and the impact that these have on his ability to find intimacy with his partner. This section argues that retold narratives are able to provide readers with a sense of familiarity with which they can approach the story, while trans-relational readings allow these readers to better understand these characters and their transness within the context of these narratives. Additionally, retold narratives work to fill in the absence of transgender people and experiences within the literary and historical archives.

The second section focuses on novels that are not based on any historical or literary precedent, but rather completely original narratives. It begins by looking Joss Lake's *Future Feeling*, which features three trans men as they each deal with their relationships to their transness, as well as each other, and reflects on the fluidity of transgender sexuality and desire. This section then looks at *Coffee Boy*, another novel by Austin Chant, which features a trans man who has not undergone any medical transitioning as he navigates his transness in conjunction with the way he is perceived. Because the stories in this section are original, rather than retellings, they are not obligated to maintain any connection to a narrative precedent, allowing them to have a wider range of opportunities with which to represent trans experiences and trans-relationally connect with readers. This project concludes by noting that although each of these novels are written by trans authors whose identities may inform the narratives, they are not tied to any one person's individual experience. Instead, fictional representations of trans men are able to provide new representations of trans experiences without the pressure from publishers to structure the narrative in a certain way in order to be seen as authentic.

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## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	ii
Introduction.....	1
Early Transmasculine Fiction through <i>Sacred Country</i> .....	7
The Transgender Gaze .....	11
Trans-Relationality and the Unreal .....	13
Structure .....	18
Chapter 1: Tell It Again: Literary Retellings and Trans Bodies.....	22
Historical Fiction, Literary Retellings, and Collective Memories .....	23
Physical Bodies and Masculinity in <i>Peter Darling</i> .....	26
Physicality, Intimacy, and <i>Confessions of the Fox</i> .....	35
Chapter 2: “Trans is Juicy”: Relationships to One’s Transness in Original Narratives ...	48
<i>Future Feeling</i> : Diversity and Fluidity .....	48
Social Transition in <i>Coffee Boy</i> .....	62
“New Modalities of Selfhood”: Trans-Relations in the Present Day .....	71
Works Cited .....	74

## **Introduction**

In 1952, Christine Jorgensen gained world-wide notoriety after medically transitioning from male to female. Jorgensen's transition and the attention she gained following her surgeries marked the beginning of a long, fraught, and ongoing obsession that the general public, both in the United States and the United Kingdom, has had with transgender people and their bodies. In 1967, Jorgensen published her experiences in a memoir called *Christine Jorgensen: A Personal Autobiography*. This created an audience for transgender narratives, opening up the door for other transgender people to publish their own experiences with transitioning. Although Jorgensen transitioned from male to female, the unprecedented attention she received served as a catalyst for people to begin thinking about transgender people and their experiences. Juliet Jacques notes that "During this time, with growing public interest in the subject, numerous transition memoirs were published, mostly by transsexual women" (359). While this marked a rise in literary transgender representation, this literature was primarily confined to memoir and focused on transgender women. Michael Dillon, a transgender man in Britain, did write a memoir around 1962, but this was not actually published until 2016, nearly 50 years after his death. However, as Cameron Awkward-Rich notes in *The Terrible We: Thinking with Trans Maladjustment*, "to date, academic monographs within and around trans studies have largely taken transfemininity as their object or collapsed transmasculinity and femininity under the sign of trans" (26). Much of the scholarship surrounding trans studies either combines transmasculinity and transfeminism, or focuses on solely transfeminine issues, leaving transmasculinity understudied and

underrepresented within the field. Thus, this project will focus specifically on literature that centers transgender men. The reading strategies presented and discussed, however, are likely applicable to literature that focus on trans women as well.

The stories of transgender men and transmasculine people, although outnumbered by the stories of transgender women, were also primarily confined to memoir and this pressured them to share only the story of their transition if they wanted to get published. As Jay Prosser notes, “Reproduced in autobiography, transsexuality emerges as an archetypal story structured around shared tropes and fulfilling a particular narrative organization” (101). These memoirs, despite being about different people with different experiences, retell the same stories in different words. In doing so, they inadvertently reinforce the idea that all transgender people experience their transness and transition in the same way. The portrayals of these experiences are generally confined to the same structure: initial discomfort with oneself and one’s body, the realization of being trans through trying to alleviate that discomfort, coming to terms with this realization and beginning a social transition, medically transitioning, and the culmination of coming ‘home’ to and in one’s own body. Each memoir, to some degree, progresses linearly through these stages as the author recounts their experience of being trans. As Juliet Jacques identifies:

One problem with transition memoirs was that they created an impression of people being focused more on themselves than any wider community.

This was a structural issue in a genre that necessarily concentrated on individual experience, exacerbated by its long-standing role in countering

lurid media coverage of transsexual lives by placing them within  
'respectable' heterosexual and gender-normative contexts. (360)

Jacques argues that these memoirs reflect an emphasis on the self rather than the larger trans community. Although memoir is inherently focused on a reflection of and on the self, they struggle to capture any experience of transness that is outside of that self. The individual experience represented instead runs the risk of becoming emblematic of all trans experiences. Transition memoirs, while they can be beneficial in providing more context, insight, and representation regarding transgender experiences, are similar to one another in the tropes and conventions that they use to tell their stories, meaning that any experience that does not align with these tropes consequently gets overlooked or seen as invalid. Moreover, these narratives are often confined to heterosexual and gender-normative standards dictated by publishers. In other words, the publishers are in control of the narrative, and authors must either conform to these standards or not get published at all, which in turn limits and ignores aspects of one's transgender experience that may not fall in line with these standards.

Jordy Rosenberg, author of the 2018 novel *Confessions of the Fox*, which will be looked at closer in Chapter 1, details his own personal experience with this demand. He “recalled that most publishers were far more eager to publish a possible memoir about his experience as a trans man than a speculative historical novel featuring a trans character” and noted that ““The thirst for my book to be a memoir rather than fiction was very powerful and palpable”” (Fallon). As a trans author, Rosenberg speaks directly to this desire for trans narratives to be in the form of memoir and the struggles he faced trying to

get a piece of transgender fiction published because publishers were only interested in his own life experiences. This reflects the intensity of publishers' desire to capitalize off of trans experiences, rather than trans potentiality in the realm of fiction. In the same interview, Rosenberg goes on to note that "he was uncomfortable with the demand for memoir—specifically, from the perspective of a white trans man—which he sees as not only potentially soliciting self-objectification ... but in his case, as centering white voices as authorities on the subject" (Fallon). Although transfeminine literature still outnumbers transmasculine literature, the last 20 years have brought a slight increase to the number of transmasculine authors being published, such as Max Wolf Valerio's *The Testosterone Files*, Thomas Page McBee's *Man Alive*, and Lou Sullivan's posthumously published selected diary *We Both Laughed in Pleasure*. Although it is refreshing to see more voices of trans men being brought into print, the large majority of these books are from white trans men, which prioritizes white voices as the face of transgender experiences and further monopolizes the representation of transgender experiences by excluding narratives of trans people of color. Rosenberg also identifies the "self-objectification" that comes in writing a transition memoir, as the author's whole narrative centers on reflecting on the self and using the self as subject for scrutiny at the demand of publishers. In attempting to pressure trans authors, especially white trans authors, to exclusively write memoir, publishers have immense power and control over trans narratives that consequently contributes to an extremely limited and singular representation of transgender experiences.

The similarity of these narratives then results in the repetition of certain events or tropes across the various narratives. One major aspect of these narratives is the inclusion of the wrong body trope, which Prosser explains as a transgender author's attempt to "articulate their bodily alienation as a discomfort with their skin or bodily encasing: being trapped in the wrong body is figured as being in the wrong, or an extra, or a second skin, and transsexuality is expressed as the desire to shed or to step out of this skin" (68). These authors, in communicating to cisgender audiences the discomfort felt within the transgender body, frame the narratives through the idea of being born in the wrong body and thus needing to transition in order to attain the correctly gendered body. This may be true for many trans people, but such can alienate trans people who do not have this same sense of dysphoric suffering when it comes to their bodies. But because this trope has been reproduced so often in memoir, it gets cast as an indicator for the authenticity of one's transness. A person who does not feel as though they are in the wrong body then does not meet the expectations of publishers, and consequently cannot be allowed to tell their story because it is not authentic. The wrong body trope is also often accompanied by mirror scenes. Prosser explains that in mirror scenes, "the difference between gender and sex is conveyed in the difference between body image (projected self) and the image of the body (reflected self)" (100). The person looks in the mirror and sees a body that does not align with their gender, thus serving as a catalyst for medical transition so that reflected self becomes what is seen in the projected self. Prosser continues, noting that "at an angle to Lacan's mirror phase, the look in the mirror enables in the transsexual only disidentification, not a jubilant integration of the body but an anguishing shattering of the

felt already formed imaginary body” (100). Disidentification, here, reflects a lack of connection to oneself, as the person realizes that they are unable to connect to their physical body due to the incongruities with the projected self. There is a disconnect between the mental image of the body and the physical image of the body, and, for Prosser, this disidentification serves as a catalyst for transgender realization that then leads to medical transition. However, as will be seen later in this section, disidentification can take on a new and powerful meaning with regard to forming connections, actually contributing to unexpected relations rather than further dividing the self. And as will be shown throughout this project, fiction has the opportunity to disrupt this trope by presenting mirror scenes that *are* a jubilant recognition and embracing of oneself, rather than a painful feeling of being split as Prosser proposes.

Because of these incongruities between the physical and mental self, medical transitioning, specifically through surgery and hormones, also becomes a major feature of these narratives. Prosser proposes that in trans narratives, surgery serves as a “coming home to the self through the body” (83). The previously wrong body is now made to reflect what the person feels on the inside, resulting in a unification of the projected and reflected selves. In memoir, these events mark a point of relief—a partial ending to the dysphoria—that the author experiences as freeing and comforting. And while this may be a common experience among trans people, the experiences of those who cannot or do not want to medically transition end up overlooked and under-represented. Prosser goes on to note that “it is the life-plot rather than the actual somatic sex change that symptomizes a transsexual” (158). Prosser’s use of the word “symptom” here refers to the medical

diagnosis that, until very recently, was universally required before one could access a medical transition. Should they want to pursue medical transition, the person must first recount their life experiences so that the medical provider can ensure that the experiences are on par with what they perceive to be “authentic” transness. While Prosser’s quote may make it seem as though a person not pursuing medical transition could still recount their life story and in turn be seen as authentically trans, since the emphasis lies in the “life-plot,” they are prevented from doing so by the inability to publish their story without a medical transition to include in the narrative. This is likely part of the reason that so many transition memoirs tend to highlight medical transition as a required piece of content. However, this also continues to repeat and reinforce the idea that to be considered ‘trans enough,’ one must have undergone medical transition. This then puts the medically transitioned person on a pedestal as an example of ‘authentic’ transness, meaning that for others to be seen as genuinely transgender, they too must undergo a medical transition.

### **Early Transmasculine Fiction through *Sacred Country***

How do we escape these repeating, singular narratives? How do we represent transgender people and experiences in a way that accurately captures the multiplicity and diversity of people’s experiences? The answer lies in fiction. Although fictional depictions of transness may be more difficult to get published than a standard transition memoir, the opportunities that fiction can offer allows it to represent more expansive and diverse experiences of transness. Unlike autobiography or memoir, which is confined to real life experiences, fiction offers unlimited possibilities with which to tell a narrative.

As Juliet Jacques notes, fiction “can communicate the various ways in which transphobia functions without being tied to the facts of its authors’ lives like memoir” (271). While it is true that more trans people could simply write about their lives and publish more memoirs about their own unique experiences with transness, fiction provides a sense of freedom to authors that allows them to break away from the need to tell their true-life story. They can communicate trans experiences—the good and the transphobic—in ways that are not tied to what is real or must meet the standards of what publishing companies view as authentic and profitable. Since fiction does not have to be based on one’s real, lived experiences—although these experiences may inform one’s fictional writing—authors have more creative liberties to represent a larger variety of transgender characters and narrate how these characters experience and embody their transness.

There are a handful of novels from the 20th century that can arguably be read as transgender fiction, such as Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness*, Alan Hart’s novels in the 1930s, and Leslie Feinberg’s *Drag King Dreams* and *Stone Butch Blues*. These novels, although they can be read as featuring trans men, do not clearly state their characters as identifying in this way. One of the earliest examples of a novel to be written in the English language with a transgender man who *outright* identifies as trans is Rose Tremain’s 1992 novel *Sacred Country*. This landmark novel includes a transgender man named Martin and depicts his experiences transitioning socially as a young child and medically as he gets older. In Tremain’s novel, Martin comes to the realization that he is a boy at a very young age, noting that he would “think about [his] coming life as a boy” and “examine [himself] for signs” that he was becoming a boy (13). While this reads as

an accurate representation of a transgender experience, based on the narratives previously put forth by memoirs, this representation of Martin upholds the stereotypical wrong body trope. The narrative is authenticated by the standards put in place by memoirs, but in doing so it continues to uphold these standards and exclude experiences of transness that may not fit these characteristics, such as one not realizing they are trans until an older age.

Later in the novel, as Martin tries to pursue a medical transition, he must first convince the doctor of his “authentic” transness. Prosser posits, with regard to transgender autobiography and memoir, that “When the subject’s story diverges substantially from the clinical genre, when its details don’t fit the specified requisites of what constitutes a transsexual story, its teller has a traditionally hard time becoming (being a transitioning) transsexual” (107). In other words, the transgender person must be sure that the narrative they share with a medical provider conforms to that clinician’s perceptions of what authenticates transness, even if this may differ from the transgender person’s lived experiences or feelings. Presumably aware of this pressure, in the novel Martin makes the choice to lie to a doctor about his family and medical history. However, afterward Martin feels as though “telling somebody about [himself]f wasn’t as hard as [he had] imagined” because he simply “said some words and there it was” but then immediately acknowledges that “it wasn’t, because the words had not been believed” (133). Martin recognizes that his own storytelling was not aligned with the doctor’s expected narrative, thus making Martin’s version wrong, and the doctor, unconvinced by Martin’s story, eventually refuses to prescribe Martin access to begin his medical

transition. Martin is not seen as ‘trans-enough’ and therefore rejected from being allowed to begin the medical transition he desires, much in the same way that real trans people must tell a convincing enough life story in order to medically transition, as well as publish their narrative.

Eventually, Martin is able to tell a convincing enough story to begin medically transitioning through top-surgery and the use of hormones. As he finally prepares to start the hormones, his new doctor tells him: “soon, your two selves will be better integrated but your status in the world will still be a special status because you will have seen the world from two different perspectives” (228). Martin experiences the integration of his pre- and post-transition self as a unification of the whole, or a homecoming that allows him to finally feel comfortable in his body. Although this is a binary way of understanding transness, Martin’s experience aligns with the sense of homecoming that Prosser notes is present in many memoirs. Prosser argues that “For the transsexual, passing is becoming, a step toward home, a relief and a release: it aligns inner gender identity with social identity; one is ‘taken’ in the world for who one feels oneself to be” (184). Passing, in other words, allows the person to experience that sense of homecoming within the body, as they are able to be perceived as their gender identity instead of being easily recognizable as trans. Martin certainly fits in with this description, feeling so content in his own bodily presentation and pleased that he is easily perceived as a man by others, that he decides not to undergo a second surgery to make his genitals more like those of a cisgender male. While passing may be a goal for many people, as emphasized in many memoirs (the authors of which ironically must then out themselves in publishing

these transition memoirs), there are transgender people who do not care about hormones or surgery or passing and are instead content to exist just as they are alongside their identity. Although one could write a memoir using a pseudonym to preserve their identity and try to prevent themselves from having to publicly announce their transness, the narrative they create will still be individualized and tethered to their own personal experiences, as dictated by the genre itself. With fiction, however, authors are not required to out themselves or their experiences when writing transgender narratives, although they could use them to influence the narrative if they so choose.

The point here is not to assert that *Sacred Country* reads like a memoir, as there are several other character perspectives that have little relevance to the transgender storyline throughout the novel. Rather, *Sacred Country* serves as an example of how characteristics and tropes present within transgender memoirs are recreated in early transgender fiction. Given that *Sacred Country* was published over thirty years ago, it is unsurprising that the novel replicates this structure even as it attempts to represent transness in a fictional setting during a time that was still saturated in trans memoir. Newer novels, however, are working to break away from this narrative structure and represent trans people in ways that reflect that the trans experience is not uniform, but we will return to this in the next chapters.

### **The Transgender Gaze**

One theory for viewing transgender representation is Jack Halberstam's notion of the transgender look or the transgender gaze. In his 2005 book *In a Queer Time and Place*, Halberstam proposes this transgender look as a way to view trans bodies, and

argues that such a gaze “opens the door to a nonfetishistic mode of seeing the transgender body” in a way that “looks with, rather than at, the transgender body” (92). The transgender gaze invites viewers to empathize with the trans character by looking with them, rather than objectify them by looking at them. Using the film *Boys Don't Cry* as an example, Halberstam details the shot in which a castrated—in the sense of having been assaulted and outed as a trans man—Brandon Teena stares back at an unharmed image of himself. Halberstam explains that in this moment, “the transgender gaze is constituted as a look divided within itself, a point of view that comes from two places (at least) at the same time, one clothed and one naked” and he argues that “the clothed Brandon is the one who was rescued by Lana’s refusal to look” (88). Viewers see both versions of Brandon and the clothed one is able to remain being seen as trans, despite the castration of the other version, because it is tied to his girlfriend Lana’s female gaze, which in refusing to look at the castrated Brandon preserves that image of him as a man. Here, the transgender gaze is reliant on the affective sympathy of viewers with the two images of Brandon, yet it relies on the extremely hurtful image of a castrated and abused version of Brandon. Even though Lana may not view the castrated Brandon, viewers are still forced to see such a broken version of him in order to look “with” in any affective sympathetic manner. In another example, however, Halberstam analyzes the film *By Hook or By Crook*, and argues that the film universalizes queerness instead of relying on affect, which then creates a transgender gaze that viewers have no other choice than to adopt. Although this theory seems somewhat convoluted, Halberstam’s political and ideological goals with this notion are to combat the fetishization of transgender bodies, centering

media that does not reproduce harmful stereotypes regarding transness—such as every trans person having the same experience or feelings—and to validate a range of transgender experiences rather than allow them to become seen as masquerades.

### **Trans-Relationality and the Unreal**

While Halberstam’s strategies for viewing transgender bodies is tied to and reliant on the visual aspects found in film, I propose a way of viewing, or rather reading, transgender bodies in literature that works toward the same goals: trans-relational reading. This kind of reading is based on one’s own experiences and the ways that they are able to connect to fictional trans characters. The *trans* in trans-relational speaks not only to the transness of the novels, but also to the ways in which the connections move between people, as in the reader and the character, as well as across genres as they move between fiction and reality. The connections can arise within any reader, not just trans people, but not all relations will be the same since they are based on the reader's own experiences. Trans-relational reading is a strategy that relies on the reader to be open and thoughtful to the character and their experiences and, at times, to read between the lines of what is not being openly revealed.

Trans-relations may arise from readers’ identification, or, perhaps disidentifications, with the characters and their experiences. José Esteban Muñoz, in *Disidentifications*, describes that to disidentify is “to read oneself and one's own life narrative in a moment, object, or subject that is not culturally coded to ‘connect’ with the disidentifying subject” and that “It is not to pick and choose what one takes out of an identification” (12). Disidentification then involves seeing oneself in a moment that they

are not necessarily meant to connect with. A trans-relational reading is a process of interpreting and interacting with a text that promotes unexpected connections or disidentifications between the reader and the trans character. This then allows readers the chance to relate to the characters' experiences through an internal embodiment with which readers can project themselves into the emotions and feelings of the character based on their own history of emotions. Sara Ahmed writes of the impressions people (and objects) leave upon one another, noting that they allow "us to associate the experience of having an emotion with the very affect of one surface upon another, an affect that leaves its mark or trace" which means that "not only do I have an impression of others, but they also leave me with an impression; they impress me, and impress upon me" (6). One becomes imbued with impressions based on their own personal experiences, but these impressions of feeling and emotion then can be used to relate to the experiences of the trans characters in literature, connecting the reader and character. The impressions left behind from one's own personal experiences can allow for connections, or disidentifications, to arise, allowing readers to embody the feelings, both sensory and emotional, of trans characters based on affective similarities, even from different experiences. With regard to trans-relationality, for example, this could be a cisgender person relating the description of the tightness of a trans man's binder to their own experience of a sports bra being too tight. The cisgender reader may not identify with the transness of the character, but the identification, or disidentification, is present nonetheless through the affective and sensory impressions, connecting the reader to the character and allowing the reader to embody the feeling of the trans character. While it

could be argued that disidentifications or trans-relations—these connections that are formed—are not exclusive to just queer or trans contexts and happen all the time, it is the self-consciousness and intentionality of these connections that really matters. Authors can write trans representations, but those representations can only truly be effective if the readers are willing to participate in trans readings of those texts. Trans representation goes both ways: it requires authors to write the trans texts, but also readers to engage with those texts consciously and intentionally.

Moreover, an openness with which one reads allows readers to think critically and reflect on often intimate descriptions of transgender bodies, and to form connections to these bodies without overly detailed descriptions that could lead to fetishization from less thoughtful audiences. It becomes a unified process between the authorial detail given to the trans character's experience, the experiences themselves, and the interaction and interpretation from the reader. An author could easily just tell readers how the character feels or give extremely detailed descriptions of aspects of the character, like their genitals, but in refraining from doing this the authors can help to promote trans-relations that allow readers to embody these aspects of the character without such overt descriptions.

While trans-relations could certainly arise while reading memoir, as well as fiction, this project looks exclusively at transgender fiction in order to explore the possibilities for capturing diverse trans experiences that are often not included in memoir. Fiction also has the chance to embrace a sense of unreality within which trans and other minority lives are often simultaneously situated yet excluded from. Jordy Rosenberg

notes that “There are ways in which, for trans people, for genderqueer people, and for many oppressed people, our existence is treated as an unreality, and that’s something that we fight against” (Fallon). Queer, and specifically trans, lives are often treated as an unreality in that they are seen as unreal or abstract, not really existing in a physical or tangible way outside of discussions. Or, they are merely seen as a narrative to be told through memoir, separated from the actual person and controlled by those with the power to publish the work. In other words, the narrative can be influenced by those in power who may wish to alter how the experiences are communicated to make the narrative more ‘believable,’ even though it may detract from what actually happened or what was genuinely felt. For example, publishers may want authors to focus heavily on their experiences of medical transition when in reality, that step may not have been a substantial step in transitioning for that person. Representation of the transgender experience becomes singular, dictated by what is allowed to be told in these transition memoirs, and consequently making every other trans experience fall into the realm of the unreal.

However, Rosenberg then goes on to argue that “we also have to fight for the ability to write fiction and to write stories that are themselves speculative and unreal,” and by this, he means that trans authors must fight for their right to write and publish fiction (Fallon). Fiction offers the opportunity to write stories that embrace this sense of ‘unreality’ in ways that promote new understandings and representations of trans experiences. They can embrace notions of the unreal and incorporate them into world or character building in ways that memoir, by definition of the genre, simply cannot. In

capturing trans experiences in ways that differ from the standard transition memoir, these narratives simultaneously fight against the harmful unreality of trans lives, while also promoting an identification with this expansive and imaginative. They can embrace a sense of imagination, or unreality, while not being committed to any sense of authenticity that may drive publishers to alter the narrative in some way. Joss Lake's novel *Future Feeling*, for example, utilizes an all-seeing agency called the "Rhiz" that oversees all matters of transition for transgender people. Such an organization falls within the realm of the unreal but is able to contribute to a fictional narrative that allows characters to navigate their relationship to their transness beyond just their physical dysphoria. This sense of the unreal, then, offers opportunities for trans-relational readings for both cisgender and trans audiences alike. A cisgender person may not have experience with medical-transitioning, but perhaps they are disabled and find themselves connecting to the characters through a desire for an easy-to-navigate medical system like the Rhiz, in turn creating a sense of empathy or sympathy between this cisgender reader and transgender people seeking medical transition. Austin Chant's *Peter Darling* also utilizes and embraces the unreal by situating transness within the realm of Neverland, allowing the narrative to take on magical qualities while exploring transness with no commitment to maintaining a sense of reality. A trans-relational reading may not result in clear-cut or expected connections, but such a process reflects the impact and importance that trans fiction can have on all readers as these novels explore instances of trans experience that are outside the standard characteristics set by memoirs.

## Structure

The following chapters will show how trans-relational connections can arise through various fictional transgender narratives. Chapter one will focus on novels that are based on narratives that already exist, either in broader history or literary history, with an emphasis on the characters' relationships to their transgender bodies. In doing so, it will look closely at Austin Chant's *Peter Darling*, which is based on J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*, and tells the story of Peter revisiting Neverland as a young adult. By retelling this story through a trans context, Chant presents a narrative of transness placed in a familiar setting that more people may be able to relate to. In doing so, Chant invites them into the imaginative unreality of a trans experience in Neverland, as Peter explores his relationship with his body and his own understandings of what makes a man, which readers are able to embody through a trans-relational reading. This chapter also looks closer at Jordy Rosenberg's *Confessions of the Fox*, which reimagines historical thief and jailbreaker Jack Sheppard as a transgender man. The novel includes several both sexually and physically intimate scenes that, with a trans-relational reading, can become a point of connection for cisgender and trans readers alike, while also bringing in discussions of authenticity and multiplicity. The attention given to the body allows it to be deeply representative of trans experiences while the lack of specifics regarding the actual description of the body helps to prevent fetishization. The emphasis on literary retellings in this chapter reflects the power that transgender fiction has in using familiar narratives to appeal to a wider audience, in addition to filling in gaps within the literary and

historical archives that have traditionally excluded transgender people and their experiences.

The second chapter will shift to narratives that are more original, or not based on narratives that already exist, and emphasizes the characters' mental relationships to their transness. First looking at Joss Lake's *Future Feeling*, this chapter will focus on how fictional narratives are able to represent multiple experiences of transness within the same narrative. The inclusion of several trans men, in addition to providing a broader representation of trans masculinity, also provides more chances for readers to connect to these characters and their experiences through trans-relational readings. They may identify with Blithe's feelings of social isolation due to lack of racial diversity, Aiden's obsession with hiding behind social media, or Pen's position as the dominant partner in a sexual relationship driven by power dynamics. These connections can help to reflect the trans characters as people, rather than objectified trans subjects whose only noteworthy quality is their transness. The second novel discussed this chapter, *Coffee Boy* by Austin Chant, captures an experience of gay transness emphasizes the social tensions of trans experiences through Kieran. This novel is unique within this study, as it represents a trans man who has not experienced any bodily change. Whereas Peter inhabits a new body within *Neverland* and the other men in the novels have each undergone some form of medical transition to feel more comfortable within their bodies, Kieran makes no mention of desiring the effects of testosterone, and although he binds his chest, does not mention pursuing surgery within the novel. The novel also looks at how the use of sexual prosthetics, especially for one who has not medically transitioned, can be empowering

and this can serve as a point of trans-relations for even readers who are not trans, such as cisgender people who use similar objects.

Novels that are more original in their narratives, as in they are not a literary retelling of a narrative that already exists, have the potential to embrace these unrealities and create new worlds and characters that are not constrained by historic or literary precedent. While literary retellings allow authors to rewrite a story and insert new material into it, such as reimagining one of the characters as trans, more original narratives are fresh and not connected to a narrative that readers may have expectations or biases toward that could influence their reading experience or even their decision to read the narrative. These novels are able to present transness and trans experiences in ways that creates new ways for readers—trans or cis—to find trans-relations within the narratives, further validating an expansive range of transgender existence. As Pen states in *Future Feeling*, “A narrative is a river and the data points are molecules that make up the water. A narrative is a living body” (59). A narrative is not stagnant, but is composed of ever evolving, growing, and changing components, much in the same way that transness is not fixed but rather is a process that differs for everyone. These narratives can be realistic, like *Coffee Boy*, and work to represent under-documented embodiments of transness. But they can also utilize the freedom of originality and the range of possibilities within the fictional genre to tell new stories that, although they may not be ‘realistic,’ can make trans experiences more accessible to a wider audience of readers.

The observations and analyses presented within this study are undoubtedly influenced by my own identity and personal connection to the content, and thus reflect

my own trans-relational readings of the characters within the novels. But as Juliet Jacques argues, this work “has the potential to change trans identities, in the here and now, by presenting alternative realities to which people can aspire” (273). Any reader of these novels will likely identify with different aspects of them, taking with them their own trans-relational connection to the characters and their unrealities. Or, perhaps one will read them and identify with nothing, take nothing with them, and find no connection or relation to the characters. That’s fine. But for those who can—who do—find trans-relations within these novels, or other transgender narratives, let them broaden the realm of transgender possibilities and experiences, and reaffirm the expansive validation of any and all trans experiences as we progress through a troubling time of ever-increasing anti-trans legislation and violence directed toward transgender people.

## Chapter 1: Tell It Again: Literary Retellings and Trans Bodies

This first chapter will examine two narratives featuring trans men that are based on stories that already exist either within the literary or the historical archive. More specifically, it will look at Austin Chant's *Peter Darling*, a retelling of J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* that reimagines Peter returning to Neverland not as a child, but a young adult, and Jordy Rosenberg's *Confessions of the Fox*, which fictionalizes the experiences of historical thief and jailbreaker Jack Sheppard. Both novels utilize narratives already familiar or accessible to the general public as a way of presenting the diversity of transgender bodies and their experiences to a broader audience in a more approachable way, encouraging readers to form connections with these characters and their narratives. For these characters, the body serves as the main point of tension as they work to overcome their physical dysphoria and remedy the mind-body split that stems from their transness. This tension is not that different from the struggles that can be found in transition memoir, but the genre of fiction—specifically a fictional retelling, here—allows these authors the freedom to incorporate other elements into their narratives, such as the magic of Neverland in *Peter Darling* or the powdery substance that resembles testosterone in *Confessions of the Fox*, while still allowing the narratives to appeal to a realm of familiarity with which to draw readers in and find trans-relations to these characters. They may relate to Peter's navigation of his own masculinity, for example, or Jack's inability to find sexual satisfaction due to the appearance of his own physical body. These are not inherently trans experiences, meaning that although they are placed in a trans context within these narratives, readers who are not trans or do not have any

connection to trans experiences can still utilize a trans-relational reading to connect to and embody these narratives. Additionally, incorporating trans bodies into these narratives and reorienting the way the body is portrayed helps to reclaim history, as well as narrative, and assert that trans people have always existed.

### **Historical Fiction, Literary Retellings, and Collective Memories**

Before diving into the novels themselves, let us take a moment to explore the importance of historical fiction and literary retellings, as well as their connection to transgender literature. Heather Love, in her 2007 book *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*, argues that debates surrounding queer history have shifted from an “effective history” that asks “‘Were there gay people in the past?’” toward a more “affective history” that asks “‘Why do we care so much if there were gay people in the past?’ or even, perhaps, ‘What relation with these figures do we hope to cultivate?’” (31). This affective view of history assumes that there were gay, or even trans, people in the past and works to find the importance and relevance of these people in our lives today. It does not try to locate them, as those doing the “effective history” have already done—or at least attempted—that work, but rather “affective history” attempts to fill in the gaps with the knowledge that queer people were present to begin with, even if not precisely where the narratives are placing them. And as Kit Heyam notes in their book *Before We Were Trans: A New History of Gender*, locating trans people throughout history is challenging, partially due to the criteria with which we look for these people: their motivation for gender nonconformity, sustained presentation of this nonconformity, and “histories that we can fit into contemporary Western ideas of what it means to be

trans” (2). Even if we locate historical figures that we presume to be trans, they likely did not identify that way themselves. The term “transgender” itself, as we use it today, only “entered widespread use in the early 1990s, although the word has a longer history that stretches back to the mid-1960s and has meant many contradictory things at different times” (Stryker 36). As a consequence, locating transgender people throughout history is challenging due to the lack of presence they have in the archive and the newness of the language used to describe gender nonconformity today, but historical fiction or literary retellings allow authors to place trans characters into these historical or familiar contexts and show how readers can connect to these figures today. In situating their narratives as literary retellings rather than crafting entirely new narratives, these novels look for the potential queerness in the original source material and explore how these narratives can relate to readers today. Even deeper than just looking at the relationships that can be cultivated, these novels have the power to ask, “what could have happened” instead of simply “what did happen?” which opens a wider potentiality of connections between these narratives and characters to the readers in the present day.

There is also power in literary historical narratives, even if they are fiction, for the creation of new ways to understand this history. As Jordan Alexander Stein reminds us, “for historians, narrative is more often understood as a byproduct of archival research methods than an abstractly theorized object unto itself” (858). In other words, historical narrative is not produced out of nowhere or “theorized” by a single object alone but is rather synthesized through a wide range of archival research which then informs the narrative. The history itself cannot be absolutely realized, but rather must be interpreted

through one's research and informed by records of the time. This allows us, then, to look more closely at the gaps and use our imagination to fill them in based on other research of the time. Alexander Eastwood follows a similar line of thought regarding literary history, arguing that it "offers an alternate perspective on how trans people experience and reinterpret history, as authors and as readers" (591). This perspective of literary history, for Eastwood, comes as an alternative to the historians' history, which is often informed by cisgender and heteronormative assumptions. Historical fiction, in addition to literary history, then, promotes new ways of understanding and relating to a history that so often excludes trans people. It allows us to reorient the bodies of the past in ways that can reveal new understandings of ourselves, as well as our relation to one another throughout time. In Eastwood's case, this way of looking at history provides the opportunity to read transness even where it is not explicitly present, such as Jordy Rosenberg does in reading Jack Sheppard as trans man in eighteenth-century London, and offers new ways of identifying with these texts, histories, and familiar narratives through trans-relational readings.

While just simply queering history offers new modes of viewing the past, engaging with these narratives through an openness to trans-relational reading further provides the opportunity to embody the feelings and experiences of these characters in their historical contexts. This also allows readers, even if they do not form any kind of relation with the characters, to better understand how people may have experienced and navigated transness in a historical context, which can then be used to inform our notions of trans experiences today. As KJ Cerankowski asserts, "The past matters not only to

discover what was lost but also what might be recovered or reclaimed” (111). Even though it can be challenging to find representations of trans people and their experiences, especially historical contexts, novels that place these characters into history, or even within popular narratives, have the ability to reclaim this history, assert the presence of transness within these times, and recover the trans absences within the archive so that readers today and in the future will have the opportunity to trans-relationshipally read these narratives as well. The narratives have the opportunity to not just represent transness in history, but to tell history through transness and trans bodies. This can apply to other literary retellings as well, such as new versions of fairy tales like *Peter Darling*. Most common stories or narratives do not include trans characters, but authors are able to retell these stories in their own ways to include or even center transness. This then plays on a collective memory of a story, using the audience’s presumed familiarity with the original tale to show how narratives can take on new meanings and characteristics, especially regarding queerness. This notion of a collective memory also opens up the narratives for more places where people can relate—whether it is the experience or thoughts of the character, or even as broad as simply being familiar with the original narrative that is being retold.

### **Physical Bodies and Masculinity in *Peter Darling***

Austin Chant’s 2017 novel, *Peter Darling*, delves into the fantastical realm of *Peter Pan* but adds a twist in making Peter himself a transgender man who flees to Neverland as a way of escaping his unaccepting and transphobic parents in the real world. Chant’s retelling of the story diverges further from the original narrative of *Peter*

*Pan* in positioning Peter as returning to Neverland as a young adult several years after his original adventures. As Peter is told, “The very world here bends for the sake of your stories, Pan” (131). Neverland serves as a place where Peter’s imagination can run free and have complete control, even though he is no longer a child, and this includes having control over his own physical body. When Peter arrives again in Neverland at the beginning of the novel, readers are shown his initial observations of his own cisgender male body and low voice, and Peter himself is filled with an “uncomfortable awareness that this had not always been true” (31). In the real world, Peter does not have the body of a cisgender man, which contributes to feelings of dysphoria and misery, and he is haunted by the remembrance of this, despite the sense of correctness he experiences as he inhabits this new body. As Peter explores this new body, one can sense the satisfaction that it brings him, but also the discomfort he feels in knowing that this body is not actually his and that should he leave Neverland, he will return to the body that makes him uncomfortable. This knowledge acts as a kind of lingering dysphoria for Peter because he feels as though his body looks like it should, yet is not truly his, nor is it guaranteed to stay as it currently is. Although being able to inhabit a completely new body is not an experience that could be captured in a memoir, or even occur in reality, it speaks to a sense of mind-body connection that is experienced in the real world. One can desire different bodily characteristics, but attaining those does not guarantee a conclusion to whatever thoughts were driving that desire in the first place. A trans-relational reading here opens up a number of possibilities for identification with Peter and perspectives through which to embody the feelings he has with his transness. This could come from

identifying with his experience of knowing something about himself that nobody around him knows or relating to his experience of still feeling an uncanny wrongness in his body even though it looks like his projected self. Because of the dysphoria Peter feels in the real world, he is determined to remain in Neverland for as long as he can in order to live comfortably in a body that he feels is right—even though he knows that this body is not his true body—rather than return to his real-world body. In Neverland, his body is right but not true, while in the real world his body is true but not right, forcing him to find a middle-ground between what is true and what is right.

As he works through his feelings regarding his new body, Peter also reflects on his experiences in his real-world body, specifically recalling how he cut off his own hair before his return to Neverland. After cutting his hair, “Peter stared at himself in the mirror, registering the terror in his eyes almost before he realized he was afraid” and comes to the conclusion that “This was exactly what he wanted, and it was unforgivable” but “If he stayed, he’d be in an asylum by the next evening” (53). Here, Peter has his own version of a mirror scene, as he simultaneously sees his reflection represent the way he should actually look while also realizing the social consequences of his actions. While Prosser argues that mirror scenes evoke a realization of the disconnect between one’s projected and reflected selves, Peter has a different experience. After he has cut his hair, rather than feel a disconnect between his projected and reflected selves, Peter feels as though these parts of himself have finally become united, but he is simultaneously overcome with a fear of social consequences from his transphobic parents. He now looks closer to the way he feels he should look, and he recognizes this within himself, but this

is what actually causes the tension—not the fact that he does *not* look as he should. This Peter’s relationship with his transness works to reframe the overarching narrative projected through memoirs by repositioning the tension outside of the transgender body and instead placing it on society. In doing so, it captures a sense of transness that is excluded from many transition memoirs, as some transgender people may feel comfortable with their physical bodies and appearance but fear the societal repercussions that come with gaining this satisfaction. Doing so also helps the narrative reach more people, as a cisgender person, through a trans-relational reading, may embody Peter’s feelings here and relate them to their own experiences that had a similar tension, such as adopting a new hairstyle or changing their clothing style. This is not intended to equate the potential consequences of changing one’s personal style to the violent and harmful actions often inflicted upon trans people, but rather to open a line of thought through which cisgender readers can, to some extent, attempt to relate their own experiences to an experience of being trans. This disruption of the traditional mirror scene makes Peter’s experience more trans-relational, as it is reframed from a specifically trans experience and placed in a situation where it could be an experience a trans person has, but also an experience that cisgender readers can embody as well.

Although he tries to enjoy life in his new body, however, Peter cannot escape the trans aspect of his identity. *Neverland* allows Peter the opportunity to exist in a body that feels right, but he is often reminded “that his skin didn’t belong to him, that he was a puppeteer moving a stranger’s body” and that “he was playing a character, while the real, lonely, frightened Peter was buried inside him” (58). Despite wanting to hide from his

reality while in Neverland, Peter is unable to live fully and freely due to the reminder that Neverland is not the real world and, consequently, nothing within Neverland—including himself and his body—is real. As the novel progresses, Peter continues to struggle with his identity and this tension. Particularly, this comes through Peter’s realization that while in Neverland, he will remain trapped as a boy and unable to become a man. After Peter and Ernest—one of the only other real people in Neverland—return to the Lost Boys with a healing flower for their friend who was injured in a battle with Captain Hook, Chant writes:

The Lost Boys had fully warmed to him after he and Ernest had returned with the flower, treating Peter with the same reverence they had when he was a boy. That was the trouble. It was the same reverence. Nothing about them had really changed in the decade he had been away. (62)

Because all of the boys in Neverland are figments of Peter’s imagination, with the exception of Ernest, they were imbued with the same values that Peter had when initially in Neverland and, consequently, they still view Peter in the same way they did when he was originally there. While Peter, after returning to the real world following his first adventure in Neverland, was forced to grow into a young adult, the boys in Neverland did not age, nor did they witness Peter’s aging, meaning that when Peter returns in the present they still see him as the young boy he used to be.

Despite growing into a young adult, however, Peter’s understandings of masculinity are still those of a young boy, one who is enamored with violence and fighting. Peter notes that “Just the thought of battle made him feel like his body was

coming back into alignment, pushing away the worst of his memories and leaving him keen” and states that he does not “like talking” but instead “[likes] fighting.” (70-1). For Peter, masculinity equates to fighting and violence, which drove his adventures as a boy in Neverland as he and the Lost Boys were frequently in battle with Captain Hook. As a young adult, Peter still equates masculinity with fighting but receives backlash on this notion from Ernest, who became the leader of the Lost Boys after Peter’s original departure from Neverland. Ernest believes that fighting and violence are childish and do not make one a man, and he leads the Lost Boys with this mentality, which Peter takes issue with upon his return. After a tense conversation regarding fighting and battle, Peter tells Ernest: “You’re sore because you’re the only one who’s not acting like a man,” to which Ernest responds by asking “What’s being a man got to do with it?” and telling Peter that “Maybe there’s just something wrong with you.” (87). In addition to navigating the reality that his Neverland body feels right but is not real, Peter is also forced by Ernest to reconsider his understanding of masculinity and manhood as he struggles to accept that fighting and violence are not the only ways to be a man. Although unhappy about it, this conversation with Ernest forces Peter to recognize the immaturity and toxicity that comes from associating masculinity purely with violence and accept that if he is really a man, he must overcome these tendencies. His body, he realizes, is right but not real, while his conceptions of masculinity are inversely real but not right.

Even though Peter feels like he is finally getting to live as a boy, or rather a man, he realizes how much his constrained notions of masculinity have isolated him from the rest of the boys in Neverland. Peter feels similarly isolated from Ernest due to him not

being present in Neverland when Peter was a child, as well as their conflicting ideas surrounding masculinity and manhood. Peter, reflecting on himself, thinks “What good was it to find out who I am and what I want if I had to be alone?” (272). Until he is able to overcome his correlation of masculinity as fighting, Peter will continue to feel estranged from the rest of the Lost Boys. While the boys, as creations of Peter’s own imagination, shared his ideas of masculinity when he was a child in Neverland, the time they boys spent with Ernest led them to progress in a way that Peter was never able to while in the real world, despite his physical aging. Ernest, in Peter’s absence, was able to instill his own understanding of masculinity and manhood in the Lost Boys. In order to remedy this feeling of isolation, then, Peter must accept that fighting does not make one a man, but rather that one is a man because he identifies as a man. Additionally, he must understand that this concept of manhood is tied to his transness and the body he has in the real world, even if it does not look like Peter wants it to.

As he makes the final decision to leave Neverland with James, who is also a real person that has been living in Neverland as Captain Hook for all these years, Peter tries to cherish one more moment in Neverland, with his body that feels right but is not true. He “gathered the scent of Neverland in his lungs, the feeling of himself, the boy he had discovered all those years ago” which “steadied him” because “Ten years hadn’t managed to take him away from himself” (281). Peter must remind himself that even though his real-world body does not match what he feels it should, his time spent in Neverland has taught him that a body does not make a man. Trans-relational readings here allow for readers to embody Peter’s feelings of reconciliation within himself at this

moment. Many trans people—especially those who are unable to access gender-affirming care or simply do not desire to pursue such care—must also come to a similar conclusion that their body does not undermine their trans identity. But this is not a trans-exclusive experience, as people with other gender identities may also find themselves relating to this notion of feeling constrained by how their body seems to dictate what they are able to do or accomplish. Armed with memories of his time in Neverland and a new sense of what makes one a man, Peter is finally able to leave and begin his new life as a man in the real world with James.

Upon returning to the real world, Peter is instantly uncomfortable with his body, but this can further enlighten readers' understandings of Peter's relationship to his transness. For example, he turns around, "folding his arms over his chest self-consciously" (283). This is due to him no longer having a flat chest as he did in Neverland. Additionally, Peter's "own voice startled him; it was higher than it had been, more refined" (286). Instead of being upset about these changes and his return to his real-world body, however, Peter is able to accept them because "it was his" (286). Here, we can see Peter accepting that although his body may not reflect his gender, it does not diminish his identity as a man. These are parts of him and his transness that he has learned to accept. Furthermore, Peter has another mirror scene. He looks at looks at himself in James' mirror and notes:

This was the face which had haunted him all his life, the one he had looked in the eye on the day he left the Darling house for the last time. The hair, messy and short, enthusiastically curling without the weight of

his old braid to drag it down. The stubborn chin. The clear, sharp, sullen eyes full of everything he had never been allowed to be. (289-90)

At this moment, Peter recognizes himself, as he did in his previous mirror scene. The difference, however, is that Peter is now able to see himself and feel safe with his appearance, instead of fearing the societal consequences of his presentation. Such a reaction reflects the impact that transphobic people and societies have on trans people and their own relationships with their bodies and their transness. Peter's first mirror scene resulted in a feeling of anxiety not because he did not recognize himself, but because he feared the consequences of cutting his hair—the action that allowed him to finally feel as though his projected and reflected selves matched. Here, Peter has a similar feeling of contentedness with his appearance but does not feel the anxiety of societal repercussions because he is with James, who he knows accepts him and his identity regardless of his physical appearance. The emphasis on his “eyes full of everything he had never been allowed to be” signals a unification of his reflected and projected selves and the sense of belonging that finally Peter feels from James' acceptance of both his identity and his physical body. Peter recognizes that “He had let his family make him believe that the only way he would ever be a boy was to be born again in a different shape, leaving everything of his body and history behind” and now, finally, he has “settled in the feeling of being himself, of being something whole” (289-290). After embodying Peter's perceptions of himself through his previous mirror scenes and flashbacks, readers are better able to understand the implications that Peter's family had on his own ability to be himself. His fear of the consequences from his family and society forced him to believe

that the only way to be a man was to look like a cisgender male. After his time in Neverland, however, Peter is able to embrace his real body and his transness, finally feeling whole after so many years of dysphoric suffering and pretending to be someone else while in Neverland.

*Peter Darling* reimagines the story of *Peter Pan* and Neverland, but it also tells a story of transness, presented through this familiar narrative. Even though the emphasis is on Peter's physical body and its relation to his transness, the narrative presents several opportunities for readers—trans or cis—to trans-relationally read and embody Peter's feelings throughout his journey. They may relate to his fear of societal repercussions for changing his physical appearance, his navigation of masculinity and what it means to be a man, or the impact that having someone accept one's identity has on their own relationship with themselves. Peter's experiences are placed in a trans context, but are approachable and applicable to a myriad of identities, allowing the already familiar narrative to represent one embodiment of transness and yet still be meaningful to readers who may not be trans. In retelling the Barre's *Peter Pan*, Chant is able to place transness into a narrative that people are likely to recognize, breaking away from the confines of memoir in order to open the narrative to more possibilities and more opportunities for people to relate to aspects of the tale.

### **Physicality, Intimacy, and *Confessions of the Fox***

Jordy Rosenberg's *Confessions of the Fox* does not retell the story of a commonly known fairy tale, but rather tells the story of a historical criminal. The novel reimagines Jack Sheppard to be a trans man and explores this narrative alongside his adventures as

he tries to evade criminal boss and thief-catcher Jonathan Wild. Rosenberg's novel is not the first time Sheppard's history has been retold, but it is the first time it has been told from a trans perspective. In situating Sheppard's story in a transgender context, Rosenberg is able to encourage a new view of history that centers transness and trans people, working to begin filling in some of the gaps within the archive. The novel also follows Dr. Voth, a trans man and an academic annotating the manuscript of Sheppard's story. Dr. Voth notes in an annotation that "Every record of Sheppard features his pursuit by Wild" but "Not one of them, however, mentions an 'Evans'" (63). The character of Wild is based on a real historical person that really did try to apprehend Jack, but this history contains no records of any man named Evans. The new inclusion of Evans in this narrative—the man obsessed with chimeras (a stand-in term for transness in the novel) and, consequently, obsessed with Jack—plays with the questionable authenticity of the manuscript when we look at this history. If Evans is not included in any other manuscript, did he really exist? Who is to say that he did not? And if this is true, then who is to say that Jack Sheppard was not actually trans? Likely he was not, but viewing this history through a critical and questioning lens allows these bodies and people to take on new perspectives, regardless of their historical authenticity. The history may not be completely authentic or accurate, but nonetheless it presents the opportunity to read transness and trans-relations in history through Jack.

Authenticity, too, plays a larger part in the narrative. This is particularly evident when Dr. Voth realizes that the manuscript does not have a single author but is likely rather the product of additions and contributions from anonymous scholars throughout

the years. He calls this “*Plitho-hypomnesis*, or: collective diary-keeping” (259). In other words, the manuscript is not authentic in the sense that it was not written by one person with all historically accurate information. Instead, it has been contributed to by multiple people throughout the years, with anachronisms that subvert the historical accuracy. However, Voth comes to the conclusion that “There is no (one) body in this archive, no one subject either” (259). While the additions to the manuscript may undermine the historical authenticity and accuracy of Jack Sheppard’s tale, they create a new kind of authenticity, as each addition creates a new and unique connection between the contributor, the manuscript itself, and those who will go on to read it. The manuscript contains a kind of multiplicity of people and bodies that have each made their own connection to it. These questions of authenticity and multiplicity reflect the power that fiction has over memoir. Memoir, inherently, narrativizes the author’s personal, lived experiences and is based in claims of authenticity, even if that authenticity is rooted in the influence that publishers have over the narrative. But Rosenberg’s novel, along with other transgender novels, are able to base their narratives on people or experiences without being obligated to accurately capture them. Even though authenticity is a major theme of the narrative, the novel itself makes no claims of authenticity in its portrayal of Jack as a trans man. Additionally, the multiplicity of the manuscript promotes the idea of a collective authorship, even though Rosenberg is technically the only author, and this creates more possibilities for trans-relational readings. Readers may embody the trans experiences of Jack or Dr. Voth, or they may identify with the toxic academic environment that Dr. Voth finds himself in. At the very least, the manuscript and its

contributions can serve as an example for how the contributions of multiple different people with different experiences can come together to create a record of transness that creates wider openings for others to relate.

In addition to questions of authenticity, *Confessions of the Fox* also explores transness and mind-body incongruities. Like in *Peter Darling*, Rosenberg captures the tension Jack feels regarding his body, which initially does not align with his gender. For example, Rosenberg writes of Jack's "something" which becomes a blanket term that stands in for transness and dysphoria— terms that had not entered the language yet during the time the manuscript is set in—and notes that this "something" "had caus'd him to dress his own chest in taut bandages under his clothes since his twelfth year, pinching at his ribs, throttling his every Breath to a forced shallow bird-sipping of the air" (33). This reveals that Jack is not comfortable with his physical body and reflects the lengths to which he will go in order to try and correct this mind-body incongruity. This is not that different from modern day experiences of dysphoria and transness, allowing readers the opportunity to see, embody, and engage with an instance of historical transness through trans-relational reading. Rosenberg also describes Jack's reaction when Bess called him "*Handsome Boy*," which thrills Jack so much that "the din and clamor of the seller's stalls didn't bother him near as much as they usually did" and "he let the world wash over him" (35). This is the first time that Jack is directly acknowledged as being a boy, and he is so euphoric on the occasion that he is unbothered by the loud sounds and dirty smells surrounding him. Readers can imagine, or even embody, the

painful pinching of the bindings around his chest and the resultant satisfaction that his someone has finally acknowledged him for who he is.

Jack, like Peter, also has a mirror scene that disrupts Prosser's correlation of reflections in memoir to feelings of disjunction between the projected and reflected selves. After seeing himself in the mirror, Jack thinks that "He looked surprisingly buckish," although "Maybe a touch too deft for his liking—he'd like to look a bull-beef" but was satisfied that "he looked buckish enough, and this pleased him" (51). Dr. Voth provides the following definitions for the language used here: buckish means masculine, deft equates to pretty, and bull-beef denotes the idea of being thick (51). Similar to the way that Peter's mirror scene defied the traditional emotions that these instances capture in memoir—those of dysphoria and the inability to recognize oneself—Jack's has the opposite effect. He is finally able to see himself and be content with his physical appearance, despite it not being a perfect reflection of his projected self. Jack, however, does not fear any social consequences from this, and instead this mirror scene is able to take on a fully positive reception as Jack recognizes unity between his projected and reflected appearances.

Fiction also allows Rosenberg and other authors to capture more intimate topics, such as sexuality and bodily intimacy, without needing to be more vulnerable as an author because these are not his own experiences, and this can be seen between Jack and Bess. Initially, Jack refuses to let Bess reciprocate the act of pleasuring due to the discomfort of his own body and the vulnerability that revealing his body would require. When Bess finally is able to remove Jack's pants, she sees "what *was and was not* there,"

resulting in her ultimately referring to Jack's identity as his "*Something*" (109).

Rosenberg refrains from further describing Jack's genitals and in doing so, helps combat what could lead to curiosity or even fetishization from those who cannot relate to Jack's experience. In a way, this vague description encourages a trans-relational reading of the text by allowing readers more openness with which they can relate to or embody Jack and his experience without being constrained in their embodiment by more specific details.

Later in the novel, after Jack has been taking the magic powder that seems akin to modern day use of testosterone to masculinize the body, his ability to be intimate with Bess grows. Jack notices that "He was straining towards her" and Bess points out the "*Transfixing Shape?*—blooming thick at his nethers" (201). Dr. Voth accompanies these descriptions with an annotation that notes "Thank God I don't have to field a question from Sullivan now" and that the "Narrator declines to give further details" and sees this as "further evidence of document's authenticity" (201). Sullivan is from P-QUAD, the organization who wants to publish the manuscript, and begins to oversee Dr. Voth's annotations partway through the novel, often urging Dr. Voth to elaborate on the vague, yet intimate moments in the manuscript, especially regarding Jack's body. Sullivan serves as a satirical reflection of the controlling publishers who influence transgender literature in the real world, either through their influence over memoirs or the pressure they put on trans authors to write memoir instead of fiction. The "transfixing shape" noted in the manuscript be read as the emergence of a phallic presence on Jack's body, but the lack of details leaves the specifics up to the mind of the readers. For a trans reader, especially one who has undergone masculinizing hormone replacement, a specific

trans-relational reading may allow them to embody and relate to how Jack's body is described. For a cis reader or someone who may not be familiar with the effects of taking testosterone, the description provided may be enough to interpret what has happened, but the specifics are left out as a way of preventing any sort of fetishization of the body. With regard to Voth's comment, then, the authenticity of the manuscript is further confirmed (before the discovery of its multiple authors) due to the lack of elaboration on Jack's genitals, as he presumes that a more inauthentic manuscript would not refrain from providing more explicit details about Jack's body.

The closest genital description readers are given comes from Dr. Voth in one of his annotations to the Sheppard manuscript. Dr. Voth, in writing about his own genitals, states that "what I have going on was outsized even before the T" and mentions the experience of "trying to explain your very—hmm—*showy* junk to confused young sexual partners" (76). Including this statement from Dr. Voth allows Rosenberg to represent another aspect of a transgender experience that could be relatable to readers who have had this experience, or who are able to embody it through a trans-relational reading yet remains nondescript enough to avoid this becoming an opportunity for fetishization. In many transmasculine transition memoirs, genitals are described in limited detail, if at all, and often done so in the context of receiving bottom surgery to alleviate the dysphoria associated with the region. Here, however, Rosenberg is able to detail two different experiences of the relationship between trans men and their genitals without revealing too much that the bodies may become fetishized or objectified. Even though they are very intimate and personal aspects of transness, these vague descriptions can be meaningful

for trans people to see themselves reflected in a fictional setting in an intentional, thoughtful, and respectful manner. Furthermore, the manuscript mentions a page that is presumed to have an image of Jack's genitals but is missing. Sullivan insists that Dr. Voth find the missing page and argues that "READERS NEED TO BE ABLE TO VISUALIZE" (132). Sullivan, in this instance, is an embodiment of the obsessive fetishization that transphobic people can possess when it comes to the trans body. Although he demands to know the specifics of Jack's genitals, insisting that this visual aspect is what will appeal to the general public rather than just the story of Jack's adventures, Rosenberg is able to find a middle ground between being able to capture a trans body and experience, that becomes accessible through a self-conscious trans-relational reading, without objectifying the trans body. Thus, Rosenberg is able to actively, even satirically, work against the frequent fetishization that surrounds trans bodies and sexuality.

The novel is also able to explore acts of sexual intimacy through Jack and Dr. Voth in a similar, self-conscious vagueness that lends itself to trans-relational reading. For Jack, this comes through the use of a horn he wears when having sex with Bess. When Bess gives the object to Jack, he immediately knows that "what this Horn wanted, simply was to make itself a part of him" (110). The Horn becomes a larger phallic extension of Jack, helping to alleviate his genital dysphoria and allowing him to feel connected to both himself and Bess. When he uses it, "he was possess'd of a calm unlike any he'd ever known" (110). Like with the genitals, further elaboration or description is not given, but the satisfaction that the horn is able to bring Jack is quite apparent as it

serves as a prosthetic device used for sexual enjoyment. For Dr. Voth, this comes when he is interested in and feels seen by the woman who works at the pharmacy, and he tries “to remember where I even last saw my cock” (52). While Voth never details any of his experiences using the prosthetic, the inclusion of a disembodied phallus serves as a reminder of his transness and reflects how he is able to trans-rationally read the manuscript and embody Jack’s feelings and experiences. This then further solidifies his connection—and even parallel narrative—to Jack, as well as to any readers who may be able to trans-rationally connect with this experience as well.

This connection to readers can be seen more explicitly later in the novel, as Dr. Voth’s annotations begin to get more personal and philosophical. He wonders “Where are my people?” in response to an intimate moment between Jack and Bess in which they are “Diving deep into the solitude, finding each other there” and “waiting, open, given over—” (166). Dr. Voth understands that the intimacy between Jack and Bess is one that lives outside of traditional cisgender and heteronormative experiences and has little representation throughout history. The intimacy is one which he can relate to, yet he recognizes the isolation that such intimacy can bring as it is considered outside the historical norm. Dr. Voth is reaching out to readers and inviting trans-relational readings that can be used to understand this kind of intimacy, even if it is not explained in great detail; readers who can insert themselves into the intimacy and embody the emotions and feelings that are being conveyed. The ability to embody to this intimacy is not limited to just trans readers, as such an intimacy can be found in queer relationships between cisgender people, or even heterosexual relationships that defy norms. This intimacy is not

reliant on the identity of the people involved, but rather the love and understanding that flows between the bodies. However, Jack's body, as a trans body, is allowed the space to become represented and interpreted through this intimacy in ways that Dr. Voth, as well as readers, can understand and even locate themselves within through a trans-relational reading.

Eventually, Dr. Voth's annotations begin to appeal to readers directly<sup>1</sup>. He asks: "Am I the only one who's been puked up by the bowels of history?" and then immediately states: "On the very good chance that the answer is *no*, I'm editing this for *us*—those of us who've been dropped from some moonless sky to wander the world" (166). "Puked up by the bowels of history," in addition to its extremely harsh connotation, refers to the way that queer people as a community have frequently been written out of history. When they are included, it is often in a negative or harmful way, or they are situated as objects rather than people. It can be challenging to find a positive historical representation of a person with a queer identity similar to one's own. This direct appeal to readers through a shared experience, then, helps strengthen the sense of community that Dr. Voth attempts to create through his annotations, inviting trans-relational readings of the novel so that readers may be able to locate themselves in this history through an embodiment of Jack and Dr. Voth's feelings and experiences. The use of "us" foregrounds the expectation that some readers can and do relate to these experiences, automatically including them in the collectively shared experiences of this

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<sup>1</sup> He does appeal directly to readers in the introduction of the book, but the introduction was written after the annotations were completed.

community. While not all readers may feel included in Dr. Voth's addresses, the text serves as an invitation for those who do relate to feel seen, while those who cannot relate are offered the opportunity to understand a group outside of their own through a self-conscious and intentional trans-relational reading.

These notions of community and history are carried through to the end of the novel. In the last annotation of the book, Dr. Voth notes that "There 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" (315). Dr. Voth uses "legacy" to refer to the history of oppression and erasure that trans people and other minority groups have faced throughout history, thus binding them together. Because the legacy of trans people has not been recorded, the novel itself serves as a way of rewriting this legacy and placing transness into this history. The idea of "no trans body, no body at all" speaks to the unfounded notion of a single trans experience that seems to be prevalent in much of trans literature and is perpetuated by the similarities among transition memoirs. Like the multiplicity of the manuscript, there is no one author of history, nor is there one singular way of experiencing transness or being trans. Dr. Voth continues the annotation by noting that "when they ask for our story—when they want to sell it—we don't let them forget" (315). This too speaks against the limitations of transition memoirs, as well as the control, and even objectification, that publishers place upon these narratives, since their interest lies only in the money that can be made from them. Thus, the manuscript and annotations are a way of telling a new narrative that is able to break outside of the confines of memoir and rewrite history in a way that does not exclude transness. In doing so, the novel also

encourages readers to be open to a trans-relational reading of this history and form connections through embodying the feelings of Jack and Dr. Voth. Readers may identify with the queer intimacy that Dr. Voth describes, or Jack's struggle to find sexual satisfaction due to his physical body, or any other aspect of Jack and his experiences. Regardless of what they are able to identify with, a trans-relational reading of the text allows readers to use their own experiences, even if they are not inherently related to being trans, in order to engage with and embody Jack and his transness.

Overall, the novels looked at in this chapter emphasize the importance of having support from others in navigating one's mind-body relationship to their transness. By the end of *Confessions of the Fox*, Jack feels as though Bess "had rewritten his Body" (274). In other words, Jack credits Bess for helping him to overcome his dysphoria and finally embrace his body and his transness. She was the first to recognize him as a boy and the queer intimacy between them helped Jack to finally feel whole, similar to the way that Peter's support from James allowed him to finally accept his body and his transness in *Peter Darling*. Although both of these novels focus on literary retellings, they are able to add their own queer aspects to these narratives. With trans-relational readings, readers are able to connect to the thicker parts of these trans narratives and gain insight into these characters, better understanding Peter's relationship with his body and transness, as well as the challenges and rewards of the physical intimacy between Jack and Bess, even if the reader themselves is not trans. These novels work to help fill in the gaps in history and literary history, as readers are able to embody the feelings of these characters and connect to these narratives. However, trans-relational readings are not limited to just retold

narratives or narratives that focus on the physical body. They can also happen in narratives that emphasize other aspects of transness, such as Austin Chant's *Coffee Boy* and Joss Lake's *Future Feeling*, which will be discussed in greater detail in the following chapter and focuses specifically on one's mental relationship with their transness, rather than their bodily relationship to it.

## **Chapter 2: “Trans is Juicy”: Relationships to One’s Transness in Original Narratives**

The second chapter will focus on narratives that are more original, or not inspired by stories already existing within the literary or historical archive. Namely, this chapter will look at Joss Lake’s novel *Future Feeling* and Austin Chant’s *Coffee Boy*. In both of these novels, the point of tension is less on the physical body and more on one’s identity and mental relationship with their transness, which opens these narratives to trans-relational readings and embodiment of the characters’ feelings. Unlike literary retellings, these more original stories are not tied to any source material and therefore have more freedom with their narratives. Although retold narratives have no inherent obligation to remain faithful in any way to their source material, their connection to a narrative that already exists may have an impact on the audience that chooses to engage with the narrative. One who is aware that the narrative is based on a story they are not familiar with may not be as likely to pick up this new narrative. Although fiction in general has the opportunity to represent a wider range of trans experiences, narratives that are not connected to any other narrative have more creative liberties and freedom with which they can represent and situate these experiences.

### ***Future Feeling: Diversity and Fluidity***

These totally unique narratives attempt to combat the universalization of the trans experience and reproduction of similar trans narratives like *Sacred Country* portrayed, despite it being an early example of transmasculine fiction. One example of these new or original narratives comes through Joss Lake’s 2021 novel *Future Feeling*. Set in a futuristic world where trans healthcare is more accessible and social media can be

accessed as holograms, *Future Feeling* follows Pen as he navigates his relationship with his identity and begins to understand the diversity among trans experiences, as well as the harm that comes from comparing oneself to others. In doing so, *Future Feeling* works to acknowledge that there is not one way of being trans, which can be seen through Pen's friends Aiden and Blithe, who are also trans men. Engaging with this novel through an openness to trans-relational reading allows readers the opportunity to find pieces of themselves in the narrative and embody the feelings of these characters through identifications formed with Pen, Aiden, or Blithe as they explore their own trans experiences. As a magistrate in the novel argues when Pen is trying to get his name legally changed, "Trans is juicy, trans is mind/body split" (153). In this instance, the magistrate wishes to hear "juicy" details about Pen's pain and suffering as a trans person in order to justify him as 'trans enough' to be granted a name change. The magistrate assumes that all trans narratives are the same and are filled with negative feelings that result from a mind-body split, rather than being able to acknowledge the joy that transitioning can bring. While the last chapter did look closely at narratives in which there was a mind-body split that caused much of the tension, *Future Feeling* actually resists this narratological tactic that is commonly associated with transgender narratives. Instead, the novel focuses on a split more akin to mind/mind—or, rather, one's struggle to embrace and accept their transness without comparing themselves to others' experiences of transness. In this way, Lake to craft a narrative that reinforces the idea that every trans experience is valid, which can be seen through Pen, as well as through the inclusion of other trans men with experiences that differ from Pen's.

Although the novel is told from Pen's perspective, it provides enough detail of other people's transness to help assert the diversity of trans experiences. Aiden, the social media celebrity that Pen is initially jealous of, notes that he takes and posts so many photographs of himself "because of all of the frames that never fit" (109). Aiden uses social media as a way of self-validation to make up for the time he spent feeling as though he could not be who he was. Now, he has reached a point in his transition where he is able to look at himself and feel confident. The screen, in this scenario, acts similar to a mirror. Aiden looks at himself and sees his true self reflected back, thus encouraging him to post these images so that others can see him the way he sees himself. Similar to Peter and Jack's previously discussed mirror scenes, Aiden feels as though his reflected and projected selves align, instilling in him a sense of completion and validation that he wishes to share with others. By the end of the novel, however, his character development shows as he acknowledges "the Gram was the strongest drug, showing myself to people who actually wanted to see me" but now that he has stopped, he feels as though, "everything I've avoided is returning to me" (277). Aiden realizes that although he feels comfortable and confident in his physical appearance, he uses these images as a shield to avoid dealing with his own mental relationship with his transness. Aiden's experience is one that shows the depth of transness, reflecting that is not merely a mind/body split that contributes to his struggle, but also the inability to accept one's transness in their past, present, and future. Aiden explains further that he feels as though he is "living in two realities," one of which he is content as he is able to 'negotiate [his] newfound closetedness" and the other in which he is still his deadname—a "sad punk person who

makes terrible decisions” (275). He has decided to go stealth, or not publicly out as trans as he was previously, and in doing so he must navigate his own trans identity and history without finding validation through strangers on the internet. He struggles with his transness, particularly knowing that he cannot rewrite his past but instead must accept how his past has helped to form the person he is now. This can be relatable to some readers through a trans-relational reading, who feel a similar tension between their ability to be themselves in the present but feel a pressure to let go of their past selves, which they may not even want or be able to do. Aiden serves as a representation of and reminder that public figures, especially queer people, who seem to have perfect lives based on what they post on social media often struggle with similar challenges as the everyday person.

Pen’s other friend Blithe has a very different experience and relationship with his transness. Although the narrative is never told directly from Blithe’s point of view, the narrative of Blithe’s life that Pen creates does offer readers some insight into Blithe and his experiences. After learning about Blithe, Pen comes to the conclusion that “Blithe spoke timidly because of course he was ashamed of being trans and ashamed of being ashamed of being trans” (89). While this is a conclusion that Pen draws based on the information given to him about Blithe’s life, and therefore may or may not be accurate to Blithe’s true feelings, it does bring attention to a part of the transgender experience that is often openly not talked about yet can still be relatable to many people: shame. Pen believes that Blithe struggles with a two-fold shame regarding his transness and his relationship with the trans community. He feels shame at being trans because it disrupts

heteronormative standards of gender, and he then feels shame about feeling ashamed of being trans because to feel anything less than pride in one's identity may be seen as a betrayal of the trans community or a lack of genuine transness. Jamison Green argues that for trans people, "Our transsexual status will always be used to threaten and shame us" and that "We will always wear a scarlet T that marks us for treatment as a pretender, as other, as not normal, as trans" (503). To openly claim one's transness risks outing themselves as a disrupter of heteronormative gender standards—othering them, in the eyes of transphobes—and creates the opportunity for transphobes to then use this identity to bring harm and potentially shame to the trans person. This is the shame that overwhelms Blithe: to be trans means to risk being other.

The second level of this shame, however, comes from the inability of Blithe to engage with other trans people in any sort of communal way due to his shame of being trans in the first place. This conclusion is further strengthened when Pen determines that "Blithe wanted to belong to the family of queer folks, and yet he'd never really allowed himself to be trans outside of his own private, wordless understanding" (89). Pen is convinced that Blithe wants to join a queer community with people who share similar thoughts and experiences regarding transness but is prohibited from doing so by his shame in being trans to begin with. Pen himself is able to do a trans-relational reading of Blithe's experiences and then convey these experiences to readers so that both Pen and readers have the chance to embody Blithe's feelings regarding his transness. This then offers readers of the novel more insight into another trans character, even if Pen's conclusions are not necessarily Blithe's truth, and allows the novel to touch upon an

aspect of transness that is seen as taboo or even to embody Blithe's perceived feelings of isolation through trans-relational reading.

Blithe is also unique in his ability to represent a transness that is not white, something that is severely lacking in transgender literature—both fiction and memoir. Sascha Crasnow notes that “individuals who are liminal both due to their ethno-religious identities as well as their queer identities, they experience an intersectional liminality” (Crasnow 212-3). Blithe's experiences are not just connected to his transness, but also directly intertwined with his identity as a Chinese person. Because of this, his experience of transness is even more unique than Pen's or Aiden's, who are both white, because Blithe's ethnicity impacts the way he moves through the world and prevents him from feeling as though he fully belongs into his ethnic or gender identity. Because of China's one-child policy and Blithe being AFAB, he was given up and adopted by white parents in the United States, thus further complicating his relationship with his identity (168). Not only does Blithe struggle with navigating his transness, but he also holds resentment toward his birth parents for giving him up, as he is a man despite his assigned gender at birth, which adds another layer of liminality through which he must navigate. As Pen thinks about Blithe and his story, Pen realizes that he “knew absolutely nothing about transracial adoption or being trans and transracially adopted” (75). Although Pen tries to help Blithe through his transness, Pen recognizes the inherent differences in their experiences due to their backgrounds. As a white person, Pen makes no attempt to relate his own experiences to Blithe's transracial adoption or the impact of this on his transness because Pen recognizes that their experiences cannot be equated. A trans-relational

reading of Blithe may allow non-white readers to embody this aspect of Blithe's identity, relating it to their own experiences of liminality. Later on, as Pen works through his own issues while still helping Blith, he wishes Aiden was around, allowing Pen to talk about "white transness with him so that Blithe could be left in peace" (217). Pen understands that while he can speak to Blithe about his own experiences and relationship with transness, the aspect of Blithe's ethnicity and the ways that this impacts his experience of transness are parts that Pen will never be able to relate to. Pen and Aiden share their whiteness, but Blithe does not have any other Chinese trans men to whom he can relate, reflecting a sense of isolation that can be present in queerness.

While it is refreshing to get details regarding these other characters and their relationships to their transness, readers have the most access to Pen's experiences, allowing for more chances to trans-relationally read and embody his feelings. Throughout the novel, Pen thinks deeply about his relationship to his transness and in doing so he provides readers with a new sense of transness that breaks away from many of the characteristics captured in memoir. In one instance, Pen reflects on his childhood before realizing he was trans, and he recalls having "no recollection of wanting to be a 'boy' as a child, as tempting as it is to try and revise history" (101). Pen resists the traditional trans narrative often found in memoir of knowing from a young age that one was in the wrong body and is even conscious of the tendency to feel the need to revise one's childhood story to fit that narrative. Instead, Pen is able to embrace his transness without feeling shame that it does not adhere to the traditional narrative. Admitting this, however, can risk being seen as not truly trans or not trans enough by those with limited knowledge of

transness, and thus this experience is one that is often not represented or discussed. This is important, as it enables Pen to serve as a fictional representation of real-life trans people whose stories deviate from the ones normalized in memoir. Many trans people, like Pen, do not feel tension surrounding their gender identity until later in life and a trans-relational reading can allow them to embody Pen's experience of this without shame. This embodiment is not limited to just experiences of gender identity but could also apply to one's sexuality or any aspect of one's identity that may relate through trans-relational reading.

Pen's thoughts continue to reveal aspects of transness throughout the novel that are not often acknowledged. Pen confesses to readers, and himself, a deep secret that he "wanted to transition enough to 'male' that [he] could reunite with certain girlhood parts and not have to explain [himself]" (158). Pen, although he is a man, wants to transition partially so that he can heal and reconnect with the feminine parts of himself without risking people saying that he is not trans or having to justify why he, as a trans man, is portraying any aspect of femininity. A trans man who feminine, or displays feminine characteristics, risks transphobes trying to invalidate their identity, since they are still embracing some of the characteristics of their assigned gender at birth. This is an aspect of transness not often captured in memoirs, as publishers seem to encourage authors to maintain and assert their masculinity throughout the narrative in order to prove that their transness is authentic. In reality, however, a trans-relational reading of *Future Feeling* could allow readers who also embrace aspects not heteronormatively associated with their gender to embody Pen's feelings and gain a sense of validation in their expression,

regardless of what society thinks. The novel is able to capture a completely different experience of transness and masculinity that can apply broadly to gender expression, and thus pull more readers into the narrative, allowing them to identify with and embody Pen's transness regardless of their own gender identity.

Pen also fluctuates between a carelessness of what others think regarding his trans identity and a critical self-surveillance, despite his desire to express himself outside of heteronormative standards. At the pool, he worries that "everyone could see my chest scars, through goggles, with swim-cap-squeezed heads" but at the same time feels as though being underwater made him "no longer trans because trans presupposed a before and after, one concrete form and then another" (19). Initially Pen is worried about others seeing his scars and recognizing him as trans, as he feels as though he is the object of another's gaze. As the object of a gaze, in a gym full of cisgender men who Pen is unfamiliar with, this places him in a vulnerable position as their recognition of his trans body could potentially mark him as a target for transphobia as less worthy of being in this public space. But at the same time, he recognizes the fluidity of bodies, especially trans bodies, and feels as though under the water he is simply a body rather than a trans body. In this moment, regardless of the way his body is perceived, he is simply a body doing the same things that every other body in this space is doing. He recognizes this moment as a present moment, rather than a pre- or post-, and is able to lay aside the notion of being the object of a gaze by embracing the ongoing fluidity and diversity of bodies.

But despite his ability to recognize bodies and transness as fluid, Pen still struggles to escape his own self-surveillance. He acknowledges that "as a trans, I'd lived

under constant self-surveillance, with my own questionable intelligent, vigorous eye keeping tabs on me” (42). Despite working to overcome this self-surveillance throughout the course of the novel, Pen acknowledges the scrutiny with which he has viewed himself in the past. He again identifies being the object of a gaze, but this time the gaze is from within himself. In doing so, he is trying to see himself through an outside perspective in order to make sure he is being perceived in the way that he desires. This contributes to his acts of self-comparison to other people, especially other trans men. He notes that he “was hardly the muscular dude that trans men were supposed to become,” although he is immediately comforted by telling himself “Thank gawd I’m a bad trans” which became his “new refrain” (194). Pen identifies how harmful the normalization of certain narratives can be, such as the stereotype of trans men being fit and buff as a result of working out to help masculinize their bodies and pass better. However, he also recognizes that this is just a stereotype and not actually true, making a joke out of it by referring to himself as “a bad trans.” Although he says this as a joke, this also represents the negative feelings, or sense of envy, that comes from feeling as though one is not living up to trans standards or stereotypes. As Hil Malatino contends:

Sometimes, such envy is rooted in forms of microfascism or internalized oppression—for instance, internalizing the notion that passing as cis is and should be the transition goal of all trans folks and that not attaining such passability is a personal failing. Even though we may be consciously against this expectation, which is also a logic that produces hierarchies of trans validity, authenticity, and legitimacy, it is still consistently reinforced

at macro-, meso-, and microlevels, from mainstream trans representations to everyday encounters with colleagues, neighbors, acquaintances, and intimates. (98)

Even though trans people are aware of the falsity and harm that stereotypes or supposed expectations—such as needing to be muscular or pass as cisgender—can bring, it can be hard to avoid the feelings associated with not meeting these ideals. This pressure is strengthened by the role of social media, where everybody appears perfect all of the time, as well as normalized representations of trans people in literature, which are dominated by transition narratives that display a very specific experience of transness. In not conforming to the experience of other trans people, one could be made to feel othered within an already othered community—thus marking them as a poor representation of the demographic—and a variety of readers may embody these feelings through a trans-relational reading that allows them to understand how transness can function in the real world based on an affective reflection of their own experiences. Although this is not necessarily true, the feelings that Pen has, despite the joke he makes out of them, break away from the normalized ways that transness may be represented in a traditional transition narrative, and instead allows the novel to depict a more realistic trans experience.

Eventually, Pen has grown enough in his relationship with his transness that he is able to offer help to Blithe. Even though he cannot help Blithe with his struggle of being a Chinese trans man, specifically, Pen tells Blithe:

It wasn't terribly long ago that I was off in my own Shadowlands, getting my wagon wheels stuck in the same ruts, hating myself, like hating myself beyond the level of hatred that any transphobic person would care to reach, imagining a thousand lost futures, experiencing moment-to-moment reality as a constant plunge into humiliation, a receptacle of the underside of an entire culture's anxieties about trans people. (120-1)

As Pen describes his own time in the Shadowlands—the dark emotional landscape representative of depression that trans people in the novel must travel through in order to reach self-actualization and become their authentic and true selves, Pen's own struggles, particularly the self-hatred he experience, becomes overwhelmingly apparent. The intensity of the adjectives with which Pen describes his time in the Shadowlands reflects the severity with which this experience impacted him and how vital it was for him to overcome these critical feelings in order to continue navigating his relationship to his transness. Although not every trans person must experience a dysphoric or catatonic state like that of the Shadowlands, Pen again does his own kind of trans-relational reading of Blithe here, using his personal experience with a similar scenario to relate to and embody Blithe's feelings in this moment. Pen is able to insert himself into Blithe's mind based on their similar experiences, in turn giving readers more information on Pen's background and a little more insight into the experience that Blithe is going through. Readers of any gender-identity may connect with the sensation of feeling lost and trapped in a depressive "Shadowland" full of self-hatred, allowing them the opportunity to embody Pen and

Blithe's feelings through a trans-relational that informs reader's own understandings of the challenges that trans people may face.

*Future Feeling* also engages with sexuality in relation to its trans characters, particularly Pen. One aspect of this is blatantly stating and recognizing the fluidity of sexuality. When Pen sees Aiden in person for the first time, he notes that "I was into queer women, but I was crushing on him hard" and "Damn the fluidity of queer desire" (26). Rather than dance around the notion of sexuality and queer desire as fluid, Pen outright acknowledges this, but immediately moves on in his train of thought rather than obsessing over it. While Lake could have chosen to have Pen grapple with this fluidity or try to make it a teaching moment for readers, it is instead presented as a simple fact of life—nothing more and nothing less. Furthermore, Pen ruminates on the use of prosthetics, which he himself uses when having sex with his friend. He notes that he used to ask himself "*What sort of pleasure could a trans experience using a silicone cock?*" but then realizes that "What cis people don't know is that trans people often have the same ludicrous questions about ourselves as you do, but are simply more motivated to deep inquiry" (47-8). This statement, in a way, serves as a direct response to the invasive questions that cisgender people tend to ask trans people about their bodies or sexual relationships. While it seems like Pen is just thinking to himself, the use of the word "you" points this statement directly at readers who may be wondering the same thing that Pen admits to being curious about in the past. This moment opens itself up for a trans-relational reading to arise through the direct appeal to readers. Those who have experience with the use of prosthetics in sexual situations, regardless of their gender

identity, may connect with and embody Pen's admission that he too used to wonder what pleasure this could bring or the "deep inquiry" to which he references.

In several instances, Pen also uses these prosthetics to engage in sexual dominance and submission scenarios with his sexual partner. Along with the inclusion of these encounters, however, Pen is conscious of gendered power-dynamics and toxic masculinity, reminding himself after his partner grunts "of either pleasure or disgust" that "she enjoyed this" and that he "hadn't transformed into a cis-monster" (44). Pen is cognizant of how harmful power-dynamics can be, especially in heterosexual relationships, and he actively tries to avoid falling into the toxic masculinity that is often the root of these issues. In many BDSM situations, "gender self-confidence [can be] fostered because gender [is] differently and much less policed within dyke + queer BDSM" (Bauer 197). Being the dominant, Pen is able to use his prosthetics and the power he has in this situation to find confidence in his transness and his identity as a man because his partner is not actively interrogating his gender. She regards him as the man he is and plays her consensual and desired role as a submissive as she would with any other man. BDSM and the use of prosthetics are not limited to trans men (nor do all trans men engage in these activities), but a trans-relational reading of this moment can allow people of various gender identities to embody and relate Pen's ruminations of these power-dynamics to their own affectual experiences of self-confidence found in sexual scenarios. This also shows Pen's relationship with his transness, as he reminds himself that he is not cis—despite his identity as a man—and he has no desire to replicate these power dynamics outside of this relationship. Even within the relationship, he is respectful

of the fact that these power dynamics only exist because his partner enjoys and, most importantly, consents to them.

Through the inclusion of so many diverse trans experiences, *Future Feeling* is able to broaden the representation of trans men beyond what any one memoir can capture. Pen notes that “As a trans kid unknown to myself with dead parents and an almost-silent aunt, I hated pop culture because it never included me, not even as the butt of the joke” (136). This is why trans fictional narratives are so vital—they are able to capture the diversity of trans experiences and provide representation that is less likely to be published in a memoir or portrayed in popular culture. Even if the narratives within this novel are not inherently true, they nonetheless represent the range and diversity with which transness can be experienced and provide opportunities for trans-relation readings to arise. Trans readers may identify with the experiences of Pen, Blithe, or Aiden surrounding their experiences of transness and transition. But cisgender readers may also find trans-relations within these characterizations of transness—maybe in the relationship between Pen and his partner, or in Blithe’s isolation as an adopted person from China who is surrounded by white people, or even in the jealousy and toxicity that surrounds Aiden’s use of the Gram and status as a social media influencer. Regardless of where trans-relations arise from, narratives like this create an opportunity for readers to use their own experiences as a way of expanding their understanding of transness.

### **Social Transition in *Coffee Boy***

So far, each of the narratives looked at have involved some form of physical transition. Peter was able to take on a whole new body in Neverland, Jack had top surgery

and the magical testosterone-like substance, and Pen, Aiden, and Blithe were each able to get top surgery and be on testosterone after coming out as trans. But as C. Riley Snorton asserts, “There is a growing consensus in transgender studies that trans embodiment is not exclusively, or even primarily, a matter of materiality of the body” (175). Trans experiences and trans embodiment do not need to focus on the trans person and their body, as not every trans person experiences bodily dysphoria or wishes to change their body in any way. Many trans people are unable to access medical transitions, or they simply may not desire any form of medical transition. While simply finding fictional representations of transmasculine characters is challenging, finding representations of trans men who have not medically transitioned is even harder, making these narratives all the more important. One example of this, however, can be seen in Austin Chant’s *Coffee Boy*, which follows Kieran, a gay trans man who has only socially transitioned with no plans to medically transition. Although Kieran is confident in himself and his identity, he still wonders “if he’ll ever really be seen as a dude if he’s dating another guy” (75). Because he is a gay trans man, Kieran worries that dating another man will mean that people will not perceive him a man, since he has not medically transitioned. As Kieran grapples with his manhood through the narrative, he serves as a representation of those trans people who also have not, cannot, or will not medically transition. Although his body is not directly a point of tension for Kieran himself, the novel does emphasize how the expectations placed upon a trans person’s body through the normalization of medical transitioning can complicate their relationship with others, as well as with their transness, even if they are content with that body.

One way that this complication can occur is through a lack of societal acceptance as a trans person who has not undergone medical transition. When thinking about his pronoun pin that he wears on his shirt, Kieran notes that “He’s not ashamed of needing to wear it—he’s annoyed that he has to” because “most people make the wrong assumption when they meet” (10). Kieran identifies the tendency that many heteronormative people have in making assumptions about people’s gender based on their physical characteristics, and thus wears a pronoun pin to try and mitigate this when he meets people. Aware of how his body and voice impact his ability to be seen as the man he is, Kieran recognizes that while “He likes the sound of his own voice,” he “knows what it sounds like to other people,” heard as “High, affected—*girly*” and he acknowledges “I can tell them to call me *he*, but I can’t change what’s going on in their heads when I talk to them” (33). Although Kieran has no desire to medically transition to any degree, he is aware of how his features, such as his voice, influence the way that he is perceived by strangers. In addition to his voice, Kieran also reflects on other aspects of himself that do not align with the masculine qualities that narratives often impose on trans men:

Like having a voice that most people associate with mean cheerleaders in high school, not bitchy trans boys who ditched the cheering but kept the persona. Like his long hair, which he loves, but which does a great job of convincing strangers that he’s a girl. Like having a roster of experiences that mean he’ll never relate to guys—most guys—in the way he relates to girls, and having to wonder if that means he’ll never really be seen as a dude. (74-5)

Although Kieran is confident in his transness and his identity as a man, he recognizes that his experiences with masculinity and manhood do not align with what is traditionally associated with being a man. His voice is high, he has long hair, he has the persona of a cheerleader—which is commonly associated with enthusiasm and optimism—and he acknowledges that it is much easier for him to relate to girls. While each of these qualities can be found in some cisgender men, they are not commonly associated with masculinity, and this causes Kieran to wonder if he will ever really be recognized and respected as a man. And yet, a trans-relational reading of these text can allow readers to embody the feelings that Kieran has here, perhaps through an experience of having a hair cut or voice deepness that does not align with heteronormative standards of gender. The context of such trans-relations may vary, but this characterization of Kieran allows readers to affectively relate to his experience of transness and gain an understanding of how society's assumptions and norms can impact a trans person, especially one who has not medically transitioned.

Kieran also navigates his relationship to his transness through considering his own visibility. He wants to be seen as the man he is, but he feels that doing so will result in people seeing him as a trans man, rather than just a man. He feels that “who he *is* means that no matter what, any kind of success will only set him up for being seen, being dissected” and that to be successful will result in “Everybody staring at him and picking him apart and wondering what he is” (81). For Kieran, success is not tied to his passing as a cisgender man, but rather to the work he does on political campaigns. Kieran wishes to be recognized for his actions, but fears that this success will result in him being seen as

a trans man, and consequently being scrutinized for his visible transness rather than being respected for his accomplishments. This thought is reinforced by Marcus, who took Kieran on as an intern, and “was all excited about hiring a skinny, testosterone-free trans guy straight out of college” (36). However, Kieran quickly realizes that “Marcus doesn’t have the personality or the attention span to monitor how everybody uses Kieran’s pronouns,” leaving this duty up to Kieran and Marcus’s assistant, Seth, to uphold “so Marcus’s office can be the fluffy safe space he wants it to be” (36). Marcus is thrilled to have a trans person on his team because of the inclusivity that it highlights but does not have the capacity himself to make sure Kieran is actually included and welcomed in the workplace as a trans person who has not medically transitioned. Rather, that falls on Kieran himself, meaning he must constantly advocate for himself as he takes the place of the token trans person on the team. Rosabeth Moss Kanter explains that in the workplace, “‘Tokens’ suffered from the effects of difference—of being the only one of their kind in a group of another kind” (14). In other words, the identity of tokens are unique compared to their peers: the only woman, the only queer person, or, in Kieran’s case, the only trans person. Through a trans-relational reading, people who have experience with being the only one of their identity in a space are able to embody the pressure, stress, and anxiety that this places on Kieran as he is forced to advocate for and validate his own identity in an environment that is intended to be safe for him. Kieran wants to be successful in his work, but in order to do that he must be seen, accepted, and supported for who he is, regardless of his physical characteristics.

Another aspect of Kieran's relationship with his transness is revealed as a result of the coffee runs he gets sent on as an intern. As he returns to the office, he wonders "if it's appropriate or okay to mention that it's hard to breathe sometimes when he's binding his chest in the baking heat" (83). This reflects the struggles that he faces in wearing a binder, but also shows that he is willing to withstand these conditions so that he can feel more confident and so that others will be more likely to gender him correctly. Although this is likely most relatable for transmasculine people who bind their chest or have in the past, a trans-relational reading may allow others to embody this the sensation based on their own experiences of wearing too tight of a bra, or tight clothes in general, or experience with chest binding despite not identifying as any other gender. The emphasis of medical transitions in transgender narratives often means that the pain of binding is eventually resolved through surgery. Binding is just one step of the process for transition. However, because Kieran does not pursue any kind of surgery within this narrative, his binding becomes representative of a trans experience completely outside of medical transition.

Moreover, Kieran's lack of medical transitioning allows readers to understand his relationship with his own body, one which differs from standard transition narratives, and this can be seen through his sexual experiences. When Kieran and Seth finally hook up, for example, it is noted that Kieran "wiggles out of his binder and leans back on the sink, letting Seth look at him as he reaches down and squeezes his packer through his underwear" (136). Here, Kieran's body becomes the object of Seth's gaze, but it is an intimate gaze that reflects the love and respect between Seth and Kieran. Kieran's

unbound chest is noted but not focused on, reflecting his own comfort with his body in the presence of someone he trusts. His chest is not a point of tension within this intimacy, but rather another part of his body to be shared with Seth. Kieran's packer is also mentioned, but not described in detail, reflecting how this object has become merely an extension of his own body. A trans-relational reading of this moment allows readers a chance to relate to and embody the intimacy between Seth and Kieran in deeper ways without fetishizing Kieran's body. Before they begin to get intimate with one another, "Seth asks Kieran what he preferred to be called or how he preferred to be touched," to which Kieran replies that he is "'not big on 'girlybits' or 'lady parts,'" but "'Other than that, whatever'" because he is content with his body. (136). This acknowledges Kieran's trans body without providing any specific details, thus allowing readers insight into Kieran's relationship to his own body in order to further understand what he means without opening the door to potentially fetishizing details. Additionally, one can also see that where other narratives highlight the body as a point of tension with one's transness, that is not always the case with Kieran. Instead, he notes that he is content with his body, providing representation of an underacknowledged experience of transness in which one is okay with their body as it is and does not need to medically transition to feel comfortable.

Like *Future Feeling*, *Coffee Boy* also engages with the idea of prosthetics for sexual play when Kieran and Seth have a sexual encounter using Kieran's strap-on. Chant describes the experience intimately, noting that "It doesn't matter that [Seth is] sucking on silicone; he still looks like he's tasting it, like it's part of Kieran he wants to explore

and savor ... Kieran can *feel* it, his cock pressing heavy on Seth's tongue" (140). Almost like an elaboration on Pen's thoughts regarding prosthetics, Kieran serves as an example of the joys that using these items can bring in sexual encounters. Chant describes these feelings in a positive way that promotes visibility and representation of these experiences without obsessing or fetishizing them. The description is vibrant enough that trans-relations may arise for those who identify with Kieran's experiences and are able to embody the satisfaction that this experience brings to him without needing to provide an abundance of details.

Through Kieran's experiences as a gay, trans man who has not undergone any sort of medical transitioning, *Coffee Boy* is able to provide representation of a different transgender experience. Kieran must navigate his own relationship to his transness outside of his physical body while simultaneously being cognizant of how this body—that he has no desire to change and is perfectly content with—is perceived by others. While many transition narratives, even fictional, focus on how the person can or does change their body in order to attain cohesion between their projected and reflected selves, Kieran's experiences show that this is not always one's goal in transitioning. The lack of emphasis on medical transitioning in this novel opens the narrative for a broader potentiality of trans-relational readings to connect readers with Kieran and his experiences. They may be a trans man who does not want to, or cannot, medically transition. Or, they may be a gay man who feels similarly isolated in their queer identity. Regardless of how or where the trans-relations arise, the narrative is able to allow readers

to find connections between their own experiences and embody Kieran's experience of his transness.

### **“New Modalities of Selfhood”: Trans-Relations in the Present Day**

Part of what makes the narratives explored within this project so effective at representing the range and diversity of various transgender experiences is that they are all written by trans people. While a cisgender author could capture an appropriate and accurate experience of transness, these narratives written by trans authors align with what Kate Drabinski calls the “politico-ethical moment of transnarrative” or “the moment where elaborating the self brings into being new modalities of selfhood and makes those models available to others who might find in them points of identification or even disidentification, enabling yet further critique” (326). In other words, these narratives are undoubtedly influenced in some way by the identity and experiences of their trans authors. The narratives may not directly be about those experiences, as they are not memoir and thus not obligated to focus on the author’s personal experiences, but they are able to offer new models of transness that readers can embody and connect with through trans-relational readings. Drabinski, writing in 2014, articulates this notion with regard to critical self-narratives, or narratives about the self that are focused on critiquing various aspects of the demand from publishers for self-narrative, such as the demand itself, the inability of language to capture one’s identity accurately, and gender norms (326). However, I contend that Drabinski’s notion of creating “new modalities of selfhood” and making “those models available to others who might find in them points of identification or even disidentification” can be applied to these fictional transgender narratives that have come out of recent years. In writing about these characters and their experiences of transness, the authors are able to make these experiences available to readers who are

open to trans-relational readings of these narratives. Regardless of a reader's gender identity, they are presented with narratives that center transness, yet open themselves up to a wide range of identifications, or disidentifications, through the characterizations of these experiences that are not often found in memoir.

This is not to say that the experiences these authors write about are their own experiences, but being able to relate to the identity of the characters they are writing is beneficial in representing them in positive, rather than harmful or objectifying ways. Allowing their own experiences to inform the characters they are writing helps them to capture and express modes of identification that may otherwise not be accessible in popular culture. And in allowing their own experiences to inform their writing, these authors are able to capture “the qualities of character and non-genital physicality, as well as aspects of personal expression that may be cultivated or innate, that give the ‘reader’ an idea of the subject’s masculinity or femininity” (Green 505). The authors are able to represent these characters, their transness, and even their sexualities without an overt focus on the character’s genitals. Rather, they explore how these characters navigate their understandings of masculinity, as well as their transness, through experiences that are not always exclusive to being trans. This not only allows readers to trans-relationally embody the feelings of these characters, but also supports the diversity and expansiveness with which one can inhabit their trans identity.

Although this project has focused specifically on novels about transgender men, trans-relational reading could, and should, be applied to texts about transgender women, as well as nonbinary people, in order to fully capture the ways that people can relate to

one another's experiences of gender without being confined by their gender identity. In a world where transgender people, both child and adult, are brutally harmed or murdered for simply being themselves, and the rights of transgender people are being threatened more and more every day, it has never before been more important to find ways of connecting and relating to the experiences of one another. Trans people are not objects, or monsters, or anything less than human beings, and their lives matter.

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