

Tensions of the Body:
Transgender Literature and the Body in Space and Time

by

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Introduction:

Tracing the Body

“Look at us. We are battling for survival. Listen. We are struggling to be heard.”

–Leslie Feinberg

“To attempt to occupy a place as a speaking subject within the traditional gender frame is to become complicit in the discourse which one wishes to deconstruct. Rather, we can seize upon the textual violence inscribed in the transsexual body and turn it into a reconstructive force.”

–Sandy Stone

Two statements about transgender literature and transgender literary criticism are essentially inarguable: 1) that transgender literature and theory is an exciting and still emerging field that promises to increase understanding, knowledge, and acceptance of transgender people, and 2) that as the access to and diversity of transgender stories increases, a growing cultural tension is highlighted, and this tension feels, in this historic moment, ever likely to burst. The tension I speak of encompasses nearly all aspects of society. It is the tension we see between the essentialist, biological determinism of the “traditional” or second-wave feminism of the twentieth century, and the multiplicity and polyvocality of third-wave and intersectional feminism from the 1990s continuing into today. It is the tension between the gender and sexuality theorists insisting that transgender theory has no place in their already marginalized, underfunded corner of academia and the transgender theorists who insist that we have always been there. It is a tension that continues far beyond academia; as I write this introduction, fifteen US states have already passed legislation limiting or even criminalizing the medical treatment of transgender children, with more jurisdictions likely to follow suit in coming months¹. It is a

¹ Sourced from The Williams Institute. For more information:
<https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/publications/bans-trans-youth-health-care/>

tension infecting schools that ban transgender students from competing in athletics or using bathrooms aligned with their identities. Indeed, it is a tension seen every time a transgender person is made to feel marginalized, ridiculed, othered, hated. It is a tension seen every time a transgender person learns to hate themselves, their body, or their very being. And so, it should not surprise us when the increase in visibility and awareness of transgender people and their stories inevitably drags with it an increase in misunderstanding, miscommunication, disagreement, hatred, and, at its worst, violence. And yet, we still see stories of persistence, of empathy, of love and communication, and of genuine connection. We see curiosity from those willing to learn, and remorse from those who evolve out of hatred and misunderstanding.

These trans-gendered tensions are not unlike the gendered tensions that arose auspiciously in the early twentieth century as women fought for their rights to vote, to own property, to control their own bodies and make their own decisions; all fights waged under an inchoate feminism that set the stage for over a century of turmoil and struggle—but also of art and beauty, literature and film, critical theory and political organizing. I propose that we are at a similar turning point now with transgender studies, which has arisen as a formal discipline in the academy over the last thirty-plus years. And we look once again to art, to culture and to literature, to understand where we may take this critical momentum. To say that transgender studies is an emerging field finding its footing in academia is not controversial; it is perhaps more controversial for me to say that transgender and/or gender variant people have always and invariably existed in one form or another, inscribed in localized cultural practices, and within varying levels of visibility and language. Indeed, as pioneering trans scholar Leslie Feinberg posits, it is not the concept of transgender that is new, but rather the attitudes allowing for its repression. Feinberg writes that, as we entered modern history, “Although ruling attitudes toward

cross-gendered expression were changing and becoming repressive, ancient respect for transgender proved difficult to eradicate and transgendered women and men continued to be present in all classes of society” (211). The transgender subject does indeed exist before and persist beyond the scholarship and study of transgender and gender variant people.

For the purposes of this paper, transgender studies—that is, in the humanities—broadly emerged in the early 1990s out of and alongside queer theory, both of which branched off (and reacted to) second wave feminism. Susan Stryker contextualizes transgender studies thusly in the introduction to her edited anthology, *The Transgender Studies Reader*:

Most broadly conceived, the field of transgender studies is concerned with anything that disrupts, denaturalizes, rearticulates, and makes visible the normative linkages we generally assume to exist between the biological specificity of the sexually differentiated human body, the social roles and statuses that a particular form of body is expected to occupy, the subjectively experienced relationship between a gendered sense of self and social expectations of gender-role performance, and the cultural mechanisms that work to sustain or thwart specific configurations of gendered personhood. (3)

As academics are to understand it, transgender studies generally concerns itself with the triangulated relationship between the body, culture, and power (the power to name, to normalize, and to efface). This thesis is intimately concerned with such subjects, examining representations of the body, culture, and power in two contemporary transgender texts: Torrey Peters’ 2021 novel *Detransition, Baby*, and Maggie Nelson’s 2015 autobiography *The Argonauts*. In these two examples of transgender literature, authors represent the body as a heuristic tool; a field against which normative fantasies play out in frequently incongruent ways. Understanding the trans body as fertile ground to consider the tensions between stagnation and change—between

hegemonic and liberatory discourses of gender and sex—we bear witness to the many ways that our very conception of “normal” bodies is rooted in the complexities of language, desire, space, and time. These constantly shifting borders and dynamics can be read and re-read in a variety of intriguing ways that challenge and resist the ideals of sexed and gendered normativity, opening possibilities of self-determinacy, affinity, and care.

I’d like to start by illuminating some of these bodily tensions by briefly tracing a historical line through three foundational texts in the field. I will begin with Raymond’s *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male* (1979). Raymond’s PhD dissertation (initially completed in 1977 and later published as her first book) is not the first feminist treatise on transsexuality, but it is the first book-length treatment of the subject. Raymond, a second-wave and so-called “radical” feminist, questions the ontological possibility of being “born in the wrong body” (a common and outdated manner of describing transgender experience). She considers the transgender surgical field to be patriarchal, capitalistic, and extremely harmful to women. One of the most famously isolated quotes from Raymond’s monograph boldly posits that “All transsexuals rape women’s bodies by reducing the real female form to an artifact, appropriating this body for themselves” (104). It is one of many inflammatory quotes from Raymond’s book that lead many to call her work transphobic, bigoted, and even constituting hate speech, though a dismissive refusal to engage with her work fails to understand the groundwork that her treatise lay for academic discussions of the role of the body in transgender studies. *The Transsexual Empire* is the first widely circulated academic monograph on the topic, which allowed for new conceptions of transgender ontology in the field of gender studies. Sandy Stone, in 1987, provided a direct response to Raymond’s work eight years later in an essay, “The *Empire* Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto,” which she wrote as a graduate student (and a living

transgender woman). Stone reads personal narratives from transsexuals to reclaim a sense of dignity towards a group of people who continue to be brutally pathologized and mischaracterized. As stone writes, her paper “is about postmodernism, postfeminism, and (dare I say it) posttranssexualism” (224). Rhetorically, “posttranssexualism” carries several possible meanings. Postmodernism, as it is frequently understood, is a reaction: a philosophical break from the empty promises of modernism and its sleek, clean aesthetics. I, however, am more interested in definitions of postmodernism which allow it to at once encompass and *expand* on the ideals of modernism. Posttranssexuality, therefore, is most fruitfully understood not as a break from prior conceptions of transsexuality, but a new method of understanding and contextualizing transsexuality that encompasses and expands on these prior conceptions. Stone’s “Manifesto” is postmodern and indeed “posttranssexual” in that it posits transsexuality as inherently postmodern: it disrupts boundaries, it calls “reality” into question, and it renders forms of thinking once thought concrete and singular to be flexible, meshy, and merely part of a larger dialogue. Stone suggests that we take “Raymond’s accusation that ‘transsexuals divide women’ beyond itself, and turn it into a productive force to multiplicatively divide the old binary discourses of gender—as well as Raymond’s own monastic discourse” (231).

A third foundational text is found in Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Writing in 1990, Butler wrote amid a scholarly revolution on queer and transgender studies, and during a definitive split between feminist studies and queer studies. Her work represents a radically new take on gender in that it sees beyond binary dualisms and challenges its readers to consider gender not as an ontological status but as an epistemological fabrication. To Butler, gender is not real, but is instead fabricated and culturally reinforced through repetitive gendered acts that interplay with the sexed body. Butler is not without her

critics, and even transgender people have felt slighted and reduced by her philosophical take on gender. What I find fascinating and truly groundbreaking about Butler's scholarship is that, for the first time, cisgender (meaning non-trans) people are implicated in transgender theory: gender isn't just a fiction for those of us whose "hearts don't match our parts"; it's a fiction for *everyone*, and so, in Butler's view, a woman born with a vagina has no more claim to womanhood than a woman born with a penis as womanhood *does not in reality exist*. Her critics mainly argue that her Derridean and Foucauldian inspired brand of philosophy ignores and marginalizes lived, material existence. Gender, indeed, may be a fabrication, but the violence, oppression, and othering of gendered minorities is not.

As I stated earlier, gender exists in change, in flux. This view is not widely shared. A. Finn Enke argues that, even in feminist academic circles, transgender studies is incorporated as "a shadowy interloper or as the most radical outlier within a constellation of identity categories (e.g., LGBT)" ("Introduction" 2). This limits our understanding of the ways gender affects all of us—the ways we are all constantly becoming, performing, and realizing gender. We can't continue to marginalize transgender existence as something "over there"—but instead recognize the expansive implications that transgender studies opens for *everyone*. If understood as a liberatory exercise in gender, trans studies is recognized more broadly as a method of critically engaging with bodies and dimensions of normalization. *Detransition, Baby* offers a timely example of such engagement. In the first chapter of this thesis, I examine the ways that Peters' text engages with ideas about the transgender and the cisgender body through sexuality, desire, pregnancy, and encounters with difference. In Peters' text, tensions between cis and trans are alleviated by affinity and care in the same ways that they are exacerbated in moments of essentialism and biological determinism. I read tensions between femininity and masculinity as

very real, material indicators of gender's fluidity and immateriality. I also consider how the politics of erotic desire and sexual identity clash in bodily encounters that blur sameness and difference. Encounters with eroticism and sexuality in Peters' work expose the dangers of bodily idealism and normalization. Ultimately, I demonstrate that Peters examines pregnancy as a means of bodily negotiation between sexual difference through three characters—some trans, some cis, and all ostensibly women—who encounter pregnancy in interfolded and varied ways while maintaining commonality and affinity for one another.

The second chapter of this thesis examines *The Argonauts* as a work of autotheory: a hybridized, polyvocal text blending autobiography, fiction, and theory to uncover the ways that gender can both affirm and limit the human subject. Loosely, Nelson writes about the transition of her spouse Harry Dodge alongside her own pregnancy with their child, working in moments of eroticism, academia, love, and misunderstanding, among other themes. I read Nelson's project as a means of encountering sameness, difference, and change in gender without giving precedence to any one theory, or any one lived experience. I consider the signifying powers of gender in Nelson's text and the ability of language to poison reality while simultaneously being our only method of communicating reality to one another. I further explore gender and pregnancy as matters of "gesture," in that they are anticipatory movements preceding future changes. Nelson's text radically re-signifies bodily acts such as gender transition, pregnancy, and aging, forming an awareness of the body as how we both encounter reality and alter it. Ultimately, I consider how the polyvocal, fragmentary formal nature of *The Argonauts* implicitly decenters each concept it so carefully examines. If we act as if there is no center to our experience, then we no longer search for resolution or meaning: however, this is not to say that

we cannot encounter meaningful moments of connection and mutual understanding throughout the changes that define us and our bodies.

The title of this thesis is borrowed from *Detransition, Baby*: “gender matters so incredibly much” (98). In my thesis, I will explore the many ways that gender matters while also considering the *matters* of gender. There are the matters of gender as a dimension of power, of normalization. These are the matters of gender as oppression; they are the matters of harm and the matters of pain. But there is more to gender than its failures and shortcomings. There are indeed the matters of gender as euphoria and pleasure. These are the matters of gender as openness and polyvocality; they are the matters of gender as desire, affinity, and community. Gender matters not just because it is limiting, but because it is expansive and shifting. Gender matters because it exists so fluidly in change and in flux, and gender matters because gender is not a matter of fixed identities but rather a matter of becoming. What I aim to demonstrate in this thesis is that the philosophies of gender engaged by these authors are of the sort that allow for such expansive openness in the face of rigidity, closure, and essentialism. If gender is indeed corporeal, if gender does have matter, then its ontology is baggy enough to encompass the many ways that we, cis or trans, encounter gender.

Chapter I:

Fantastic Bodies: Femininity, Desire, and Sexual Difference in *Detransition, Baby*

As transgender theory proliferates and transgender activists' voices become louder and more visible, author Torrey Peters sees a crossroads between the lives of trans people and the academic theories that construct the discourses of gender. Her *Detransition, Baby* responds to claims that theory is a tool which does little to account for these very lives and bodies.

Detransition, Baby is an embodied text. It is sexual, it is erotic, and it engages primarily with the notion of bodies: what they can do, what divergent bodies can imply, and how we can hurt and harm those who transgress the normative bounds of what the body can and should be according to hegemonic discourses of gender and sex. Explicitly eschewing political theory and high-minded academic thought, *Detransition, Baby* is about the real lives of its characters. As Peters states in an interview with *The Guardian*, her goal was never to politicize her work. Readings of *Detransition, Baby* with the aim of increasing one's knowledge or become a better ally to trans people are "shallow" (Peters quoted by McConnell). Indeed, as Peters comments, "I had the freedom to imagine trans people as just quotidian, boring, flawed people. I wasn't engaging with trans people as an embattled group" (Peters quoted by McConnell).

Detransition, Baby focuses primarily on three women who experience and engage with womanhood in greatly divergent manners. Reese is a transgender woman yearning to become a mother. Ames, formerly Amy², is a detransitioned trans woman who begins a sexual and romantic relationship with his boss, Katrina, a cisgender woman who becomes pregnant with Ames' baby. Ames, who cannot countenance the possibility of fatherhood, asks both Katrina and

² A note on the character of Ames/Amy: as the text fluidly moves through distinct temporal narration, the name and pronouns referring to the character change just as fluidly. I will follow the text and use the same name and pronouns given to the character in each scene I read.

Reese to take an unthinkable leap: to raise the baby together, as a trio. Katrina's pregnancy becomes the spine of the text as chapters are titled in relation to conception: the novel literally bifurcates time into the before and after of Katrina's pregnancy, demonstrating how her pregnancy becomes a force of alienation and struggle, not just for Katrina, but for Ames and Reese as well. Published in 2021, *Detransition, Baby* comes in the wake of decades of meaningful trans activism, and responds directly to the pacifying claim on the behalf of well-meaning activists that, perhaps, gender simply doesn't matter anymore. It's a comforting thought that perhaps we are *beyond* gender; that in an age where trans people live more openly than ever, where more people are freeing themselves from the binary every day, perhaps gender is becoming a fiction of the past. But, to Peters, this misses the mark. As Ames states to Katrina, "gender matters so incredibly much" (98). *Detransition, Baby* reaffirms the manifold ways that gender matters, but not in its hegemonic traditions. As Sandy Stone writes, by reclaiming our narratives, trans people can "begin to *write oneself* into the discourses by which one has been written" (232). As you read this chapter, I encourage you to consider Stone's theory of post-transsexualism explored in the introduction. What implications does post-transsexualism carry beyond transgender theory into the actual, messy lives of real people? This chapter of my thesis explores the tensions between transgender theory and transgender lives, between transphobia culture and transgender existence, and the internal tensions of gender, sex, and desire experienced by all characters regardless of gender identity or status as gendered subjects. As these tensions permeate, gender matters proliferate.

This chapter is divided into three sections. The first section explores the ways trans women relate to femininity, showing that femininity is derided culturally whether against the backdrop of cis or trans women's bodies. The second section considers the politics of desire in

relation to trans bodies, reading desire both as an extension of eroticism and also as personal desire for certain bodily characteristics. Both forms of desire influence significant portions of the text and shape our main impressions of several of its characters. The third section closes by considering the role of sexual difference in the topic of gender and struggles between divergent bodies and identities. Broadly, you might consider these three sections as representing the three most consistent philosophies of gender explored in the text: gender as expression, gender as desire, and gender as sexual difference. In each section, I highlight the implicit danger that fantasies of normalization represent—for *all* bodies, but especially trans bodies—and conclude by parsing out the alternatives that the text offers, in each of the three cases, to the rigid essentialism of accepted discourses on gender and sex.

“A Concept Called ‘Femme’”: Trans Women, Femininity, and Excess

A central consideration of *Detransition, Baby* is the manifold ways that trans women engage with, perform, analyze, and claim femininity. A continuous undercurrent is the concept of femininity as an *ideal* that is both performed and desired by trans female characters—at once natural and contrived. Transmisogyny, at the intersection of transphobia and misogyny, is a self-generating force in *Detransition, Baby*. Peters demonstrates how transmisogyny is not only a cultural phenomenon generated by the non-transgender community, but a dimension of the insecurity and self-hatred faced by trans women. As Reese meets her ex-partner to discuss her possible role in Katrina’s pregnancy, she comments to him: “You were a languid boy, who learned to move like a woman, who then learned to move like a boy again, but without wiping your hard drive each time. You’ve got all these glitches in the way you move. I was watching you in the ice cream line—you slither” (31). Reese’s pin-sharp visual judgment of other transgender bodies is a common theme in the text, and it is one shared by Ames, as well. Later,

Ames reflects on “the ugly involuntary method by which his hateful vision broke a trans woman’s face down into component parts, then remodeled them in the brain to strip away the apparent feminization and see what she had looked like before transition” (42). What do these two quotes suggest in juxtaposition? Femininity, to the trans women of the novel, is treated almost as a sacred and finite resource. Reese and Ames both portray a hyper-vigilance common to trans experience, a hyper-vigilance that Ames carries with him even post-detransition. To trans people, there is safety that comes with invisibility, or “passing.” As posited by A. Finn Enke, “Transgender perspective thus includes political awareness of the ways that social institutions and built environments train all people to pass as a single, consistent, legible, and acceptable gender” (5). Interestingly, their awareness of this “training” works in two ways: it destabilizes the concept of gender performance as natural or biological, while also making it the most important facet of transition: Reese and Amy (before detransition) are wholly invested in “getting it right”; in performing femininity to the standard that is both required of trans women while also being the locus of a significant amount of cultural transmisogyny.

Julia Serano elaborates on this double-bind which paralyzes most trans women into the state of hyper-vigilance and insecurity displayed by both Reese and Ames. To Serano, “Transmisogyny is driven by the fact that in most U.S. contexts, feminine appearances are more blatantly and routinely judged than masculine ones” (“Reclaiming” 172). Since femininity in most contexts is read as “manipulative, insincere, and artificial,” so are those who perform femininity (“Reclaiming” 172). Importantly, to Serano, this does include *all* women: whether trans or not, femininity is a chore of a performance viewed as excess: manipulation, insincerity, disingenuousness. To Serano, however, this misogyny is never as apparent as it is when played out against a supposedly male body. A common transphobic narrative, for example, goes

something like this: trans woman fetishize femininity, and only transition to fulfill some sort of sexual fantasy: but this myth “not only belittles trans women’s female identities, but encourages the objectification of women as a whole” (“Skirt Chasers” 230). As Reese herself puts it: “the term ‘autogynephilia’ only works if you don’t think trans woman are women. If you do, then you immediately see that the majority of women, cis or trans, are all autogynephiles . . . Of course women are turned on by being women and men turned on by being men!” (142). Let us consider what Reese implies and Serano declares: sexualizing trans women as autogynephilic, overly feminine, or deceitful is misogyny; an insidious misogyny that suggests women are only women insofar as they can be sexualized, and that the value of all women exists in their sexuality and physical appearance. Exemplifying this phenomenon, Amy shamefully describes her attraction to forced-feminization fantasies in written online erotica: “The femininity forced upon the males was the ultimate in degradation and humiliation—and what did that say about her opinion of femininity?” (138). Later, however, she would see generic “women”—perhaps both cis and trans—who had “eroticized and sexually defanged every unspeakable shame and violation life had thrown at their womanhood” (138-39). What we find in Amy’s realization and in Serano’s work is the universal, nagging shame of femininity, and the various ways that women countenance that shame.

To the trans characters of *Detransition, Baby*, femininity is freeing: it’s how they most clearly and comfortably express themselves. But the relationship to femininity is more complex, as well. Femininity, to trans women, is dangerous: at once it is judged as both excessive and artificial, yet also the bare minimum requirement for respect and humanity. Toeing the line between fear of femininity and desire for it, Reese and Ames have become hardened by experience. One such experience worth close reading is an early foray into femininity by a pre-

transition, college-aged Amy. A crossdresser named Patrick, whom Amy meets online, takes her to the *Glamour Boutique*, a store for crossdressers and transgender women. Amy's sense of gender euphoria—those rare and frequently temporary moments in which a trans person's identity and expression is affirmed rather than tugged against; that is the opposite of gender dysphoria—is heightened as she becomes more comfortable in the store, taken in enthusiastically by Jen, the trans woman clerk. But as Amy, Patrick, and Jen become more comfortable and begin to gather a rapport with each other, a mother and her daughter walk into the store, presumably by accident. Suddenly, "Amy's joy in having found a feminine space meant especially for her dimmed ... The sense of safety that she had spun over the store vanished ... Inwardly, she disavowed the space. The store did not reflect her. She did not truly belong there" (144). In this moment, Amy's connection to femininity is soured by shame. Indeed, her immediate reaction is the desire to apologize, as if she had taken something from this woman and her daughter, something that belonged to them, but not to her. As Amy's shame manifests, it encompasses not just herself, but Jen as well: "Amy ... could no longer see anything but how trans [Jen] was, accompanied by revulsion at every feature she identified ... Fear had poisoned Amy's thoughts. Cruelly and involuntarily, her vision flayed away all the beauty from Jen like sheets of skin peeled from her body" (146). In this moment, Amy's vision objectifies and delegitimizes her performance of femininity and Jen's. As Judith Butler writes, "how we do or do not recognize animate others are persons [depends] on whether or not we recognize a certain norm manifested in and by the body of that other" ("Doing" 184). Amy's fear and shame demonstrate the dangers that femininity can represent for trans women, as well as the dangerous effects of normalized fantasies played out on incongruously gendered bodies. Her cruelty to Jen is only a manipulation

of her cruelty to herself; it is transmisogyny acted within and without her own conscious understanding of femininity.

Closing this section, I'd like to consider, again, what femininity means to trans women, indeed, to queer women as a whole. Consider Reese's thoughts on the concept of femme:

The nameless amalgamation of characteristics that queers melded and tempered into a concept called 'femme': creatures so territorial that they clipped their own acrylic claws with barely functional political movements like 'femme solidarity' or 'femme4femme' relationships so as not to rip each other to shreds. On one hand, Reese found the whole concept of the femme to be reductive and stupid and a little precious. On the other hand, Reese had no doubt that, inadequate as the femme rubric might be, she knew herself to be that thing that it sought to describe, and that thing was very real. (164)

Possibly as a defense mechanism or coping strategy, Reese frequently regards aspects of her gendered identity—and the societal conditioning of gender—with skepticism and often sarcasm. Within her skepticism, however, remain frequent moments of sober truth: unable to name just exactly what it means to be “femme,” she still recognizes its power as a fluid category of identity by pure association. Unlike womanhood or even femininity, identity concepts rooted in exclusion, femme is, to Reese, more malleable, bendable, flexible. Writing on the concept of femme, Serano boldly asserts, “Fuck insular communities that are centered around any identity. I am no longer looking for a home; I am looking to make alliances” (“Reclaiming” 179). Femme, as an extension of solidarity and connection not fixed by the identity politics of womanhood and femininity, is where Reese finds these alliances for herself. Femme does not negate womanhood or femininity, but it does add the possibility of compromise—and community through self-recognition—in the face of rigidity.

Idealized Bodies and the Politics of Desire

Butler points to the notion of sexual dimorphism as an “ideal” (“Doing” 187), while Stone posits that the transgender body is “a hotly contested site of cultural inscription, a meaning machine for the production of ideal type” (230). To Butler, sexual dimorphism is a fantasy produced by culture and revealed to be inadequate by the very existence of atypically gendered and sexed bodies. To Stone, what the transgender body represents in medicalized discourse is a locus for the *production* of that ideal. Through the production of sexual idealism against medicalized bodies, sexual dimorphism is, ironically, confirmed. I’d like to consider the ramification of the “ideal” body as it pertains to *Detransition, Baby*. In this section, I read “desire” through two intersecting lenses: desire as a facet of eroticism and sexual discourse, and desire as a heuristic of medical idealism. Speaking of desire in erotic contexts, I turn to an early scene in the text in which Reese is in the midst of a highly sexualized exchange with a married man, Stanley. Stanley refers generically to Reese’s “pussy,” a fantasy she plays along with, until eventually, he claims, “first I’m going to *own* your pussy” (7). Stanley, who has admitted his desire for trans women, still refers to her body in cis-centric terms, carrying with it the violent, patriarchal implications of his “ownership” over her “pussy.” As I read in the previous section, Peters frequently demonstrates how fantasies of idealism are played out on a variety of bodies in seemingly incongruent ways. In this momentary exchange, we might ask in which *context* “pussy” is being used, both by Reese and Stanley. Are we to understand “pussy” as referring directly to Reese’s penis or her anal orifice? Or, are we to understand that Stanley acknowledges his belief that having a vagina is pre-requisite to recognizable womanhood, despite his confirmed attraction to transgender women? Through Stone, we may see a possible reading of this exchange:

In the case of the transsexual, the varieties of performative gender, seen against a culturally intelligible gendered body *which is itself a medically constituted textual violence*, generate new and unpredictable dissonances which implicate entire spectra of desire. In the transsexual as text we may find the potential to map the refigured body onto conventional gender discourse and thereby disrupt it, to take advantage of the dissonances created by such a juxtaposition to fragment and reconstitute the elements of gender in new and unexpected geometries. (231)

To Stone, the “refigured body” of the transgender subject against “conventional gender discourse” becomes itself a site of meaning-making; a heuristic of gender and sex. Desire is rich and multifaceted, and its complexities can possibly disrupt these conventional discourses. But the implicit violence of “ownership” in this context does suggest a narrower reading of the exchange in which Stanley warps and manipulates Reese’s body to render it more legible under the auspices of hegemonic sexuality. Her eager participation in this discourse does not challenge his patriarchal assumptions; instead, she provides space for his inability to countenance his desire for her body. Indeed, to David Valentine, “since the late nineteenth century in the West, the erotic is not expressed as particular desires but, rather, as discrete *identities*” (408, italics mine). Stanley, a straight man attracted to trans women, maps Reese’s body onto an accepted discourse of sexuality that confirms his identity as heterosexual. As Valentine writes, these categories of sexual identity “rest implicitly on the logic that of binary gender which underpins the homo/hetero identity structure, a structure which requires clearly gendered men and women to desire one another (or each other)” (409). To be clear, no body is unambiguously female, or unambiguously male—but the transgender body, frequently understood as an outlier to

heterosexuality, can ironically restructure our understanding of sexuality as an extension of *desire*, not of identity.

Reese understands that the politics of sexual desire and the politics of sexual identity are often at extreme odds with one another, which is why Reese met Stanley on a dating website designed specifically for trans-amorous men: “Reese only ever dated on fetish websites” (49). As she bluntly puts it, “You don’t get to choose who you fuck, you get to choose from among those who want to fuck you” (51). Identity categories such as “straight” and “gay” fail to account for erotic desire expressed towards ambiguously sexed or gendered bodies. As Valentine writes, “Looking at what people say about what they desire, who they desire, and how they act upon those desires can highlight for us the political nature of desire and the ways such yearnings are shaped by the identity categories through which they are forced to speak if they wish to get a hearing” (417). Much like physical sex, identity categories are therefore revealed to be an idealized fantasy of their own; and frequently, they become a violent ideal when the object of one’s desire does not fit with ideal type or hegemonic discourse: as Enke writes, “The many examples of institutional efforts to spatially organize bodies ... provide lenses into the ways that bodies are not self-evident material” (Enke, “Introduction,” 14). Categories of sexual identity speak louder than those of desire—hence, the sublimation of Reese’s individual body into acceptable discourses of cisgender ideals. Yet her body, as Enke says, is not so self-evident. Stone’s reading of “new and unpredictable dissonances which implicate entire spectra of desire” offers a roadmap to see how this brief erotic exchange between Reese and Stanley exposes the impracticality of idealism.

Before closing this section, I want to return to another common expression of desire in *Detransition, Baby*: as a heuristic of medical idealism, or, put more simply, the desire expressed

by trans characters—particularly Reese—to medically align their body with cisgender standards, despite understanding the oppressive source of these desires. In one example, Reese considers a frequent site of dysphoria for trans women: thick, protuberant brow ridges that develop as a masculinizing effect of puberty. “Reese maintained that foreheads drive trans women insane precisely because *there is a surgery to alter it*. The surgery created the dysphoria even as the dysphoria created a need for surgery” (197). We can return here to Stone’s notion of “the production of ideal type.” To Stone, if the transgender body is text, it is constantly under siege and re-writing by medical paternalism. Plastic surgeons who become wealthy performing feminizing surgeries ostensibly offer a service for the common good, but it is a service that reaffirms rather than challenges idealized body types. And Reese, despite her understanding of the harm that this phenomenon perpetrates to the trans community, cannot relinquish her own desire for such altering surgeries: “...politics and practice parted paths at her *own* body. She would happily cheer on any other woman who flaunted her orbital ridge in the name of challenging cis-normative beauty standards, but she would have the first misogynist dick of a surgeon burr her skull Barbie smooth” (198). Desire arrives here to affirm fantasies and idealism against fragile bodies that are routinely sites of violence.

Medical idealism becomes a locus of this violence against such fragile bodies. Butler offers a reading of the highly sensationalized David Reimer case, more frequently known as the John/Joan case, in which a male infant’s penis was damaged during a standard surgical procedure, and, wishing to provide a normalized life for the infant, a doctor decided to perform a procedure to remove Reimer’s testes and construct a vulva, convincing Reimer’s parents to raise him as female. The surgeon who altered Reimer’s body in the first place argued “for the ease with which a female body can be surgically constructed, as if femininity were always little more

than a surgical construction, an elimination, a cutting away” (Butler, “Doing,” 187). An interesting paradox is at play here: To Serano (as seen in the previous section), femininity is excess, artifice. But within the field of transgender medicine, it is in fact maleness that is understood as excess: it is bone structure that must be reduced, vocal chords that must be tightened and shortened, phalluses that must be cut away and inverted. Surgical feminization of the body—with perhaps the sole exception of breast augmentation—is always a story of removal, reduction, of “cutting away” at the imposing maleness of the trans female body. As Reese states, the possibility of “cutting away” is the generative point of the dysphoria that these surgeries aim to treat. Transgender medicine minimalizes the body much in the way that Reese minimalized herself to fit with Stanley’s chosen discourse. But desire to fit into an idealized type is not so easily thought away. Transgender medicine is merely an arm of the misogyny and paternalism that makes breast augmentation, liposuction, Botox, and other imposing procedures desirable and even “necessary” for women of cisgender and transgender experience.

Reese’s participation in discourses of idealism has developed thus far in two interesting ways. She affirms her partner’s patriarchal desire to induce an idealized form against her actual body, while *herself* indicating a desire for medical procedures to help align her body to such ideals. Both types of desire, whether rooted in eroticism (“owning” Reese’s pussy) or medicalized patriarchy (“cutting away” at the supposedly shameful masculinity of the brow ridge) exist to uphold the heterosexual matrix. Valentine writes of “double-binary of homosexual heterosexual and masculinity/femininity, with their roots respectively in yet another binary: that of sexuality and gender” (409). Categories of difference are thus categories of either/or: are you gay or straight? Are you a man or a woman? What is your sexuality, and what is your gender? How do they influence one another? The insidious danger of reducing sexuality to identity is, to

Valentine, its power to “obscure particular desires both in people’s lives and in scholarly discussion of them” (410). Politics of identity become politics of difference, of dimorphism and binary opposition. But bodies account for desire in manifold ways that are more liberatory—and more fascinating—than sexual identity. Understanding desire as a facet of human experience that is baggy enough to accommodate difference rather than centering it provides a compelling alternative to discourses of cisgender, heterosexual idealism.

Taking and Giving: Pregnancy as a Heuristic of Sexual Difference

As I explored briefly in the introduction, the most consistent undercurrent theme of *Detransition, Baby* are the tensions raised by Katrina’s pregnancy, Ames’ anxieties about fatherhood, and Reese’s desire for motherhood. What these tensions illuminate is an understanding of sexual difference not as an irreducible rigidity or as an ethics of place, but, as Gayle Salamon argues, “where I confront the otherness of the other without annihilating or canceling that difference or replicating the other in my own image” (423). In other words, we can view the *place* of sexual difference as not just the space shared by all women (or all men) and marked by irreducible sameness, but it is the place where we encounter those who may or may not share in our identity markers in vastly divergent ways. The “place” of sexual difference becomes not an ontological reality but an epistemological puzzle. Sexual difference begs, implicitly: how do we build alliances, trust, and affinity networks with people who share our values? As Salamon writes, “Contrary to the hope that place will be sufficient to give things a solid anchor in existence, we find that place is reckoned only through relation. The place of things ... is only found through other things” (420). In hegemonic discourse, sexual difference is marked in relationality and oppositionality: it is a discourse of chromosomes, of genitals, of secondary sexual characteristics. Katrina’s ability to carry a child becomes the irreducible difference between her and Reese.

Though Reese wishes to join Katrina in motherhood, she is determined that as a trans woman, society will never view her as a rightful mother; that cis women are bound by presumptive motherhood and trans women must fight to gain legitimacy as mothers. But Katrina, who has also suffered a miscarriage, pushes back on Reese's essentialism in two telling ways: "if you think I don't understand how it is to have a body that isn't home to babies, I do" (172). Katrina also reminds Reese that the "right" to motherhood is not so simple; that it is only white cis women who are presumptive mothers: for "black women, poor women, immigrant women," motherhood is not a given right, but a privilege (177). Motherhood is not presumptive, Katrina argues: motherhood is a constant battle; it is "just some vague test designed to ensure that everyone feels inadequate" (174). Katrina extends the "place" of womanhood towards a ground of affinity: the fetus in her womb represents both possibility and choice, and the struggles toward motherhood, whether they resemble each other in their specific shapes, are struggles nonetheless faced equally by her and Reese. As Katrina later argues, "This isn't a zero-sum game. I'm not even offering to *give* you anything. I'm inviting you to join me, to put in commitment and work. I don't think of a child as something given back and forth, and I actually think you wouldn't either" (231-232). Katrina views the possibility of motherhood as a future rooted in community and affinity, as something that is shared rather than held and given over in increments.

As Ames' role in the future of Katrina's baby takes place, we see more interesting potential for the expansion of the ethics of sexual difference. After spending most of the text contemplating on the nature of choice and his fraught, tenuous relationship with gender, a sudden understanding comes to him: "And finally, there, an answer: He does not want his child to know him as he is" (318). Ames, who detransitioned in response to the trauma and hypervigilance of existence as a trans woman, cannot countenance his role as a father to his and Katrina's baby. As

Butler asks, “If ‘identity’ is an *effect* of discursive practices, to what extent is gender identity ... the effect of a regulatory practice that can be identified as compulsory heterosexuality?” (*Gender Trouble* 24). Ames, eventually, proposes an alternative to the “regulatory practice” of “compulsory heterosexuality.” Following a fight between Katrina and Reese, Katrina decides to terminate her pregnancy. While sitting in Katrina’s living room with Katrina and Reese as they wait for her scheduled abortion, Ames asks the room: “Well, what if this is our solution? Maybe this is so awkward and hard and without obvious precedent because we’re trying to imagine our own solution, to reinvent something for ourselves, whatever kind of ... whatever kind of women we are” (337). Katrina’s simple response—“Maybe”—defers to the potential to adapt sexual difference in radically new ways. Ames’ identity as a detransitioned trans woman, not unambiguously male and not unambiguously female, provides a roadmap for this new adaptation. For how can Ames be a biological father to Katrina’s baby while also remaining in the realm of womanhood—can we understand Ames’ role in the pregnancy *as* fatherhood, even on a biological level? I turn again to Salamon:

The trans body can also help us understand the traversal of sexual boundaries not as an unrepresentable breach but as a negotiation of difference. Recognizing that movement is possible across the borders of male and female means that the bodily envelope cannot only be understood as the symbolic marker of the absolute otherness of sexual difference. (425)

Ames’ identity remains a “negotiation of difference” in the same way that Reese does as she considers the philosophy of her loss: “Reese grips the chain-link with her fingers and peers in. ‘I lost my baby,’ she tells the building ... ‘I had a miscarriage,’ she tells the ghosts. Is this a lie? ... She had planned for a baby, and now she had lost a baby ... What else is that but a miscarriage?”

(325). In the moments leading up to Katrina’s abortion—an event that does not take place over the course of the narrative, and is left suspended—all three women are caught in a moment of becoming, as a state of change without definite beginning or end; without teleology. Reese’s devastation at her “trans version of a miscarriage” (325) is also, in its way, a negotiation of difference at the infinite moment of becoming. Ames’ final claim to womanhood and Katrina’s ambivalent response to it play out similar moments of becoming. To put it simply, all three subjects have stakes in the possible future of the child, stakes which are not hierarchical or regulatory. Divergent representations of bodies at the text’s closure are not “marker[s] of the absolute otherness of sexual difference”; they are generative sites of understanding and affinity in a time of great uncertainty. The text’s ambiguous closure suggests the implicit infinity of becoming. For how can gender be ontologically decisive when it is so varied? Can we indeed view gender in the manner that Butler attributes to Kate Bornstein; that gender, especially when spatial boundaries are crossed, “[engages] transformation itself as the meaning of gender?” (“Doing” 188). Indeed, “if one is not born a woman, but becomes one, then becoming is the vehicle for gender itself” (“Doing” 188). *Detransition, Baby* is a story that warns of the harm that is necessarily instituted when normative fantasies are played out on divergent bodies. Condemning essentialism in all forms—whether coming from cis or trans perspectives—Peters shows that difference is not an isthmus we look across. There is no opposite shore, no binary resistance from which we generate meaning. Meaning, instead, is produced fractally and recursively by the becoming that is implicit in the very structure of gender and sex.

Chapter II:

Gender Under Duress: Gender De/construction in Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*

The hermeneutics of gender have dominated feminist and queer scholarship for decades. Once viewed as an “essence” that precedes and therefore defines the sexed body, gender is more and more frequently understood as a series of signifying acts and performances that, in their repetition, forge a façade of truth that oppresses gendered minorities rather than empowering them. As such, queer and transgender scholars have spent years asking the question that bears repeating: is there a productive method through which we can understand gender as a heuristic tool of self-discovery, identity, and empowerment, without falling back on outdated and circular discussions of essentialism and the sexed body? This tension is frequently mirrored in Maggie Nelson's 2015 autobiography *The Argonauts*, a memoir capturing the author's journey as she comes to terms with gender as a discursive performance through the transition of her spouse, Harry Dodge, and her pregnancy with their child. Yasmina Jaksic calls *Argonauts* “autotheory”; a blend of autobiography, autofiction, and theory. Jaksic writes, “As an emerging branch of autofiction, autotheory's fusing of multiple contradictory forms ... creates space within the genre to allow for underrepresented lives to be written into being and shared” (159). Autotheory, therefore, blends genres while also defying the concept of genre altogether. In the mutually supportive binary of form and content, we may ask ourselves when reading *Argonauts*: is gender the content, and the writing about gender the form? Or is gender the form, and the writing about it the content? Or, could we confidently assume that gender—and text—are both content and form?

The Argonauts is as genre-defying as it is gender-bending: blending prose with poetics, personal essay with professional scholarship, and ivory-tower academic text with real, embodied

stories, Nelson urges us to problematize binary thinking and false dichotomies in ourselves and the societies that shape us. The title fittingly refers to Barthes, quoted in *The Argonauts*: “the subject who utters ‘I love you’ is like ‘the Argonaut renewing his ship during its voyage without changing its name.’ Just as the *Argo*’s parts may be replaced over time but the boat is still called the *Argo*” (5). As both Nelson and Harry “change [their] parts” through pregnancy and transition but remain fundamentally and paradoxically unchanged, Nelson encourages a radical departure with hegemonic concepts of gender through contrasting moments of tension and empathetic witnessing. Nelson encourages us to see gender and queerness as acts of movement, acts of becoming which emerge through time and space, and by which we may approach authenticity.

This chapter of my thesis focuses on the potential of Nelson’s radical gender reorientation represented in *Argonauts*. In three broad sections, I outline some of the implications of her work on transgender studies. In the first section, I consider the discursive aspects of gender through Nelson’s intricate attention to our dangerous misconceptions of gender through its very signification. In the second section, I examine the juxtaposition of Nelson’s pregnancy with her partner’s surgical gender transition, examining the fluidity of movement, change, and acceptance that Nelson portrays in this portion of the text. The second section of this chapter owes a great debt to Julian Carter, whose essay on the implications of movement and gesture for transgender studies guides a significant portion of my reading of *Argonauts*. Finally, I consider the manifold ways that *Argonauts* encourages us to recontextualize and resignify gender in ways that are more open to change and fluidity than the rigidity offered by the traditionally enforced boundaries of gender.

“Cookie-Cutter Function”: Signifying Gender Linguistically in The Argonauts

As Judith Butler posits, “genders can be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the *truth effects* of a discourse of primary and stable identity” (*Gender Trouble* 186, italics mine).

Furthering her claim, Butler writes of gender not as a “project” but as a “strategy,” a term which “better suggests the situation of duress under which gender performance always and variously occurs” (*Gender Trouble* 190). *Centripetal* forces of gender policing catalyze the signification of gender linguistically and bodily as a *centrifugal* series of performances, usually performed strictly under duress, and for survival. Nelson formally problematizes this signification in *The Argonauts*: to her spouse Harry, language is “[n]ot only not good enough, but corrosive to all that is good, all that is real, all that is flow” (4). The act of naming, according to Harry, reveals the “cookie-cutter function” (4) that underlies the psychological and societal processes involved in signification. Nelson demonstrates an awareness of gendering as one of these “corrosive” signifying processes, one that is enforced culturally through linguistic and psycho-social forces. Nelson here brings our awareness to gendered pronouns: while attempting to locate Harry’s proper pronouns on the internet, she admits humbly to “becom[ing] a quick study in pronoun avoidance” (7). She has decided to avoid using signifying pronouns for Harry, aware of their “corrosive” linguistic nature bringing gender into focus as a “cookie-cutter function.” As A. Finn Enke puts it, “Words fail utterly, as do all conventions of naming the variety of ways we live with gender” (“Education,” 77). Nelson, like Harry and Enke, understands the “corrosive” nature of gendered pronouns but still can’t help but admit her desire to find “the you no one else can see” (7). Her desire to find a definitive set of pronouns by which to refer to Harry is, like gender, a force that is both centrifugal and centripetal, within and without: using the pronouns that feel most comfortable to someone both assuages the speaker’s guilt over potentially mis-identifying

those they speak about, while also ostensibly providing a space that is comfortable and affirming to the gendered subject. But the use of gendered pronouns in any context can indeed be corrosive, as well. We *should* problematize any attempt to translate the complex time, space, and place of gender into discrete and discursive categories. Enke writes, “Particularly when it comes to identity confirmation, narratives do their work by selectively collapsing time and place into the present through the use of undisrupted signifiers” (“Education” 71). Gendered pronouns are a form of narrative, in that they convey complex stories through multiple means. The body, in all its changes, is a map of time and place. The narrative of the body, when told discursively, becomes soured; corroded. Nelson asks, “*How can the words not be good enough?*” (7). How, indeed?

Narrating directly to Harry, Nelson demonstrates how the linguistic signification of gender is co-opted and questioned in queer circles:

When making your butch-buddy film, *By Hook or By Crook*, you and your cowriter, Silas Howard, decided that the butch characters would call each other ‘he’ and ‘him,’ but in the outer world of grocery stores and authority figures, people would call them ‘she’ and ‘her’ ... Because if the outsiders called the characters ‘he,’ it would be a different kind of he. Words change depending on who speaks them; there is no cure. (8)

In this passage, Nelson *localizes* signifying practices of gender: the harmless fun of gender-fuckery in queer spaces is perverted elsewhere by homophobia and transphobia, exemplifying that gender, once again, is a survival strategy. Nelson calls our attention here to what Enke refers to as the “situational generation” of new language and terminology in the queer community (“Introduction” 4). While the use of incongruent linguistic signification of gender carries one meaning within this community, one of parody and “relief,” such co-opting of language by

external gender policing forces signifies something else: an abjection of gender differences and non-hegemonic performances of gender (it is the “butch” characters—women who present masculine and often or occasionally pass as male—who receive the brunt of policing in the quoted material above). But as Jack Halberstam writes, *By Hook or By Crook* accomplishes something unique: it makes queerness universal specifically by *not* commenting on it, offering, in Halberstam’s words, “a vision of community, possibility and redemption through collaboration” (129). It is what draws Nelson to Harry’s work, but *The Argonauts* is clearly a different beast in this regard—Nelson does not make queerness universal by making it presumptive. Instead, she makes queerness universal by calling our attention to the sheer *size* of queerness, the breadth of possibility that it contains.

Nelson’s intimate familiarity with the signifying powers of language in relation to gender reveals gender to be an external structure rather than an internal essence. As she attempts to protect her unborn child from interpellation by repressive gender ideologies, she destroys “an envelope with about twenty-five ultrasound photos of his in-utero penis and testicles” so that her son could “stay oblivious—for the first and last time, perhaps—to the task of performing a self for others” (95). The cultural maintenance of gender—as an *anatomical* reality rather than a *performance* of normativity—merely blurs the truth that all notions of the “self” are a performance. Nelson gives further attention to the signifying powers of language to hide the lack of a false Real “self”: “To align oneself with the real while intimating that others are at play, approximate, or in imitation can feel good. But any fixed claim on realness, especially when it is tied to an identity, also has a finger in psychosis. *If a man who thinks he is a king is mad, a king who thinks he is a king is no less so*” (14). As such, Nelson’s work fits with Butler’s argument that gender is a discursive fabrication not just for those who perform their gender “wrong,” but

also for those who perform their gender in alliance with socio-cultural structures—those who perform their gender “right.” The difference between these two groups is often reduced to a *bodily* ontology: someone with a male body should perform masculinity, and someone with a female body should perform femininity. The man must be a man; the king a king. But whether or not her son performs masculinity, and whether or not he does so out of a conscious effort, it remains a *performance* of selfhood. Or, as Enke puts it, “cisgender arrives to affirm not only that it is possible for one to *stay* a ‘woman’ but also that one *is* ‘born a woman’ after all” (63). This is the crux of what emerges as Enke’s argument *against* the binary of cisgender and transgender: the very dichotomy implies that to “remain” in the gender one is “born” as is natural and normative, and that those who stray or identify elsewhere—especially those who make changes to their body’s gendered narrative—are wrong, other, alien. Butler takes issue with the notion of the “body” as a stable, primal material force that exists as the locus of a true gender. As she posits, the performance of gender means that “the medium itself must be destroyed—that is, fully transvaluated into a sublimated domain of values” (*Gender Trouble* 177). The act of signifying or internalizing gender does not emerge *from* the body in Butler’s view; it in fact *destroys* the body by inscribing upon it one of two rigid, binary options, upholding not only the false dichotomy of male/female gender but also the false dichotomy of inner Body/outer World.

Body Gestures: Pregnancy and Gender Transition

The body is gendered through three means: sexual or bodily anatomy, gender identity, and gender performance (*Gender Trouble* 187). Butler writes that “the body is always under siege, suffering destruction by the very terms of history” (*Gender Trouble* 177). This border maintenance is tireless, unending work. But if gender is not an essence preceding from the body, where does that leave the body? In other words, how can we reorient towards a culture that

affirms and uplifts those who experience a perceived incongruence between their anatomy and their gender identity? Nelson recontextualizes and problematizes the issue of the “body” by drawing our attention to pregnancy as a radically body-altering act on par with a gender transition: “Is there something inherently queer about pregnancy itself, insofar as it profoundly alters one’s ‘normal’ state, and occasions a radical intimacy with—and radical alienation from—the body?” (13). Later, she quotes from a “postpartum website”: “*Don’t think of it as, You’ve lost your body ... Think of it as, You gave your body to your baby. / I gave my body to my baby. I gave my body to my baby. I’m not sure I want it back, or in what sense I could ever have it*” (109). The question bears repeating: in what sense can one “own” their body? How can pregnancy and gender transition both offer a “radical intimacy” and a “radical alienation from” the body?

In *The Argonauts*, some of the narrative’s most climactic moments emerge in acts of empathetic witnessing. Nelson sees Harry’s “neck and back pulsing with pain all day, all night” after thirty years of binding their chest (31). Her response to witnessing Harry’s pain and bodily trauma is informed at once by care, pain, and anger. “*I just want you to feel free, I said in anger disguised as compassion, compassion disguised as anger. Don’t you get it yet? you yelled back. I will never feel as free as you do, I will never feel as at home in the world, I will never feel as at home in my own skin. That’s just the way it is, and always will be*” (31). Harry’s sense of being trapped and immobile exemplifies Julian Carter’s treatise on gender as movement: “physical sex easily becomes a condition of existential inadequacy. No way out” (130). But gender, to Carter, can be a project of change, effacing the stagnation of inadequacy. Carter views this project as a form of motion, which he reads through the performance of dance. In dance, transitions “are movements that accomplish change; they redirect moving bodies’ relation to tempo, energetic

focus, spatial orientation or intercorporeal connection” (137). Carter proposes that gender transition, like dance, lies in the possibilities represented by *gesture*: “Taking gender transition literally, as a matter of gesture, can facilitate thinking about its impact on relationality in ways that attend to the physicality of embodiment without bracketing the body’s social, psychic, and affective dimensions” (131). To Carter, gesture is the anticipation of carrying a weight or burden. Gesture is movement readying the body for future movement; to gesture is “to embody one’s intention” (131). Intention need not be primarily physical or non-physical. In this sense, Harry’s gesture—their movement anticipating future movement—is “social, psychic, and affective” all at once just as is Nelson’s pregnancy. Nelson’s text, formally, enacts gesture as well. It is fragmentary, tentacular, a quilted patchwork. Moments in the text are not classical storytelling in that they eschew beginnings, middles, and ends; indeed, taking comfort and resting firmly in “middle” moments, the narrative is constructed with a sense of gesture: each change in the narrative from one moment from the next, interspersed as it is with scholarly voices and paratext, is anticipatory of the changes to come. Both in the stories that Nelson tells and in the storytelling forms she employs, change begets change.

When read side-by-side as the text encourages us to do so, Harry’s top surgery and Nelson’s pregnancy are gestures that selectively fold time in on itself. At once, Harry’s surgery acknowledges the parts of his body that he has long struggled with while also preparing for a future in which they do not signify the same burden (physically and emotionally) that Harry once carried. As Nelson writes to Harry following their reconstructive chest surgery, “I’ve never loved you more than I did then, with your Kool-Aid drains, your bravery in going under the knife to live a better life, a life of wind on skin, your nodding off while propped up on a throne of hotel pillows, so as not to disturb your stitches” (81). The “inadequacy” of Harry’s body folds in with

the embodied pain of his surgical recovery and the anticipatory future of freedom that Nelson envisions in this moment of empathetic witness. In this way, her work is both life-affirming and body-affirming, carefully reminding its reader that every bodily act is a matter of change, and that these changes are constantly re-framed and re-oriented by hegemonic socio-cultural forces:

On the surface, it may have seemed as though your body was becoming more and more ‘male,’ mine, more and more ‘female.’ But that’s not how it felt on the inside. On the inside, we were two human animals undergoing transformations beside each other, bearing each other loose witness. In other words, we were aging. (83)

Nelson reminds us that all bodily acts emerge merely as changes through time. Whether physically transitioning to affirm one’s gender, becoming pregnant and giving birth, or, simply aging. There may be meaningful differences between these bodily acts, but perhaps there is not a similar difference between the sources of the cultural norms we inscribe upon them. Nelson offers a sense of self-determinacy in Harry’s gender transition, which she describes as “[a] becoming in which one never becomes, a becoming whose rule is neither evolution nor asymptote but a certain turning, a certain turning inward” (53). Harry’s re-inscription of their body through physical and linguistic means is not (just) a physical transformation, nor an approach to a closure that will never be met, but is a “turning inward” towards self-determinacy and self-affirmation. Reading Harry’s surgery through the lens of her own pregnancy, Nelson witnesses their respective changes as gestures that invite intimacy, connection, and authenticity.

“No Use in a Center”: On Change and Becoming

After attending a talk by Anne Carson, Nelson writes, “[i]n bonsai you often plant the tree off-center in the pot to make space for the divine. But that night Carson made the concept literary. (*Act so that there is no use in a center*: a piece of Steinian wisdom Carson says she tried to

impart to her students)” (49). It is a recurring question Nelson poses to her reader: how can we have it both ways? How can we affirm the gender of those with the bravery and courage to claim their own space as a gendered subject, while also uprooting the *centering* of gender as an ontological concept? But as Nelson reminds us, “There is much to be learned from wanting something both ways” (29). Or, as Jaksic posits, Nelson’s work is “to ask questions without promising definitive, digestible answers” (144). The real work of *The Argonauts* is not in locating a definitive conclusion, but in looking, witnessing, feeling, thinking, sensing, and becoming. Jaksic writes of “becoming” as an act of change that lacks teleology or a definite beginning point. “Becoming” is always located in the midst of change; becoming *embodies* change. In *The Argonauts*, perhaps the resolution to its many tensions is not only located in acts of connection and empathy, but also in its characters’ ability to live with change and within change. “Becoming,” indeed, is the only constant in Nelson’s work. Transition is, after all, “the technical language par excellence of bodies in motion” (Carter 131). Tensions surface when these motions are disruptive to normative theories of gender, but tensions also surface when stagnation appears more natural than becoming does. Finding comfort and stability in motion, Nelson encourages her audience to see change as more enduring and more sustainable than stagnation. To Nelson, queerness is always motion, it is always change, it is always becoming. Again, we also return to matters of form—how does the text itself enact a form of “becoming” in its very fragmented nature? The brief, clipped stories comprising its narrative are not strictly linear; moments in Nelson’s life are called upon as if the text itself is lost in thought—these moments seem to depart as quickly as they arrive, interspersed with scholarly quotes and personal musings. Remember Jaksic’s discussion of autotheory: the fragmented yet cohesive manner that Nelson blends autobiography, fiction, and theory. Taken together, the patchwork

storytelling format becomes becoming as its conclusions linger recursively rather than strictly building into denouement. The classical singular moment of resolution is replaced with outstretched moments of lucidity that lead, but never in a linear fashion, into one another.

Nelson asks, “How to explain ... [t]hat for some, ‘transitioning’ may mean leaving one gender entirely behind, while for others—like Harry, who is happy to identify as a butch on T—it doesn’t?” (53). Within this rhetorical question lies Nelson’s appeal to a deconstruction of gender that offers in its place a proliferation of radical bodily autonomy, radical openness of gender, and radical *confusion* in the place of “a culture frantic for resolution” (53). And if our culture reflects such a frantic search for resolution, why does “resolution” need to be painted in binary, dichotomous terms? As we are reminded by Butler, “[g]enders can be neither true nor false, neither real nor apparent, neither original nor derived. As credible bearers of these attributes, however, genders can also be rendered thoroughly and radically *incredible*” (*Gender Trouble* 193). Sandy Stone writes that a truly open transgender theory should be “disruptive to the accepted discourses of gender” (230). *The Argonauts* disrupts hegemonic discourses of the sexed and gendered body to allow for, paradoxically, gender *eradication* and gender *proliferation*. Nelson’s resolution, then, is what lies within the ability—and the bravery—to see beyond the binary dualisms of gender into a splendid, and indeed incredible, multiplicity.

Delay and Reality: Conclusion

In both *Detransition, Baby* and *The Argonauts*, we consistently see stories of bodies at odds with a culture obsessed with biological determinism. As I have shown in these two chapters, bodies represent this tension through a multitude of means through which we see unfold the frictions between change and tradition: language, desire, space, and time. Repeatedly, the question is implicit in both texts: where and what does “home” look like for the trans body? And yet, it is also worth expanding this question: where and when is *any* body “home”? How do we construct and seek safety, comfort, and community in ways that uplift and affirm embodiment without simultaneously affirming dangerous fantasies of normalization? We find responses to these questions in intriguing and sometimes incongruent ways. One important concept I return to here is that of *becoming*—becoming as a state of constant change and flow; becoming as a matter of anti-teleological existence that takes comfort in the constancy of such change. Humans and our bodies exist not in static moments, but in fluidity, in rearranging. As Ames comments in *Detransition, Baby*, “Wasn’t that the big lesson of transition, of detransition? That you’ll never know all the angles, that delay is a form of hiding from reality” (27). Reality, whatever we may consider it to be, exists more fully in moments of transition than it does in the delay—or willful ignorance—of change. The same ruminations background Nelson’s text. At its center, *The Argonauts* is a story of becoming. It is a story of *connection* through acts of becoming. Strategically employing empathetic witness, the blending of theory and life-writing, and the inevitability of change, Nelson allows *becoming* to proliferate—not as an indeterminate and threatening shapelessness, but as a method for understanding how our bodies change through space and time. Our bodies at once construct and are constructed by our very notions of spatial and temporal orientation: “And so we go on, our bodies finding each other again and again, even

as they—we—have also been *right here*, all along” (86). The paradox of embodiment is that we are always present in our bodies, and yet our bodies are always changing. Where we find ourselves, and how we navigate the changes that lead us to these places, is where we also find networks of affinity and community.

Both texts are also stories of parenting and family; they are stories of queer concepts of family that disrupt and recontextualize normativity. Interestingly, both texts problematize pregnancy as the center of familial construction. *Detransition, Baby* represents two divergent ways of reading sexual difference through Katrina’s pregnancy. Traditionally, sexual difference is marked by oppositionality: maleness and femaleness are maintained as separate spheres which carry distinction only in the relation of their bodily differences from one another. Motherhood, under this view, is one matter of bodily difference: one is a mother *because* she carries her child in her body. But Katrina reads her pregnancy as a locus of community, of engagement with others. Wanting to share in the construction of her family with Reese and Ames, she embodies an ideal of motherhood that does not stop and end at pregnancy, nor is it enabled or necessitated by pregnancy. As I wrote in the first chapter, Reese’s feeling of loss after Katrina’s decision to terminate her pregnancy becomes the narrative turning point through which sexual difference becomes not a matter of bodies in opposition but of bodies in moments of affinity. In *The Argonauts*, Harry’s transition in can be read as a matter of gesture; in other words, as a matter of anticipation: a transition embodying the space between *here* and *there*. Bodily gestures therefore emerge as changes in time and space, which is how I read both Harry’s physical transition and Nelson’s pregnancy. Nelson indeed reads her pregnancy as a form of transition and an extension of queerness. Harry and Nelson undergo bodily changes alongside each other that at once represent “radical intimacy” and “radical alienation” (Nelson 13). As Nelson posits, queer

family-making “reminds us that any bodily experience can be made new and strange, that nothing we do in this life need have a lid crammed on it, that no one set of practices or relations has the monopoly on the so-called radical, or the so-called normative” (72-73). In other words, family-making is beautifully radical and beautifully normal in both queer and heterosexual contexts. In both texts, bodies do not determine our relationships to each other or to our children, but this does not mean that family is not an embodied practice. Parenthood is its own form of becoming, a kind of transition in its own right that forces an encounter with one’s body as both strange and familiar. The same acts carried out by different people will have radically different meanings in each context.

Becoming can describe the ways we confront and engage with our bodies and the bodies of others. As Julian Carter writes, “transitional time’s folding ... may heighten the body’s sensitivity, invaginating it so that it touches itself in several different moments at once” (142). All bodies are in motion: in manifold ways we may never understand, all bodies experience change. Gender transition is one such change that allows for a reorientation towards embodiment and enables this kind of “touching”—in which we exist in more than one time, and more than one place, at once. Transgender texts such as *Detransition, Baby* and *The Argonauts* show us that change is indeed more stable, and more inevitable, than stillness. I return to Sandy Stone as I close this final section. Stone argues that “We need a deeper analytical language for transsexual theory, one which allows for the sorts of ambiguities and polyvocalities which have already so productively informed and enriched feminist theory” (231). Writing in 1987, Stone envisioned a future for transgender theory that would be informed by the kinds of openness and fluidity already seen in feminist circles. The problem, to Stone, is that the structures of gender and sex in hegemonic discourses do not allow for fluidity in any context; that even the kinds of narratives

that allowed transsexuals to live openly required a complete and total bifurcation between “birth sex” and “new sex.” Transition was the privilege of a few, it was highly medicalized, and fraught in mainstream circles. I will not argue that this has radically changed in thirty-five years, but I would like to consider the ways that *Detransition, Baby* and *The Argonauts* demonstrate some of the ways that we see Stone’s vision enacted. Sex, including transsexualism, has long been determined by rigidity, binary opposition, and biological determinism. Yet here, we have closely examined two examples of texts that *celebrate* fluidity, openness, change, and becoming. Instead of the clean break between the “originary” sex of the body and the newly transitioned sex role, both texts portray trans bodies that engage with their own narratives at multiple temporal and spatial locations. The cultural landscape is changing, albeit slowly. Torrey Peters, herself a trans woman, published *Detransition, Baby* through one of the “Big Five” publishers. The voices of trans, queer, and nonbinary people are louder than ever, and more people and institutions are indeed beginning to listen and perhaps even willing to learn from them. Tensions have not disappeared overnight—but in these two texts, we see how the body can be engaged with, questioned, and ultimately, recontextualized using the very same discourses that seek to destroy the self-authority of trans people. As Stone posits, by reclaiming our narratives, trans people can “begin to *write oneself* into the discourses by which one has been written” (232). The self-determinacy and agency of queer and trans writers constructing our own narratives is both cause and effect of a radical cultural reorientation towards sex and gender that promises to benefit us all.

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